

BORNEO

Saturday 28th July – Saturday 11th August 2012 (15 days)

Leader: Chris Kehoe

Group Size Limit: 8

Tour Category: Easy to Moderate for the most part (one optional fairly Demanding walk)



Bornean Bristleheads, the island's endemic bird family (Craig Robson)

Borneo – island of head-hunters, Orang-utans and mighty Mount Kinabalu, the highest peak between the Himalayas and New Guinea. For several centuries after its discovery by Europeans this great equatorial island remained shrouded in mystery. Fables grew up about the 'Wild Men of Borneo', the fearsome Dyaks who brought the heads of their enemies back to their longhouses. In the 19th century the island came under British and Dutch colonial rule, passing later, with the exception of the tiny sultanate of Brunei, to newly independent Malaysia and Indonesia. Even today settlement is largely confined to coastal areas and much of the interior remains remote.

From a wildlife viewpoint Borneo is one of the richest places on earth. Tropical rainforests originally covered almost the entire island and, although widespread felling is now seriously shrinking the forest, vast tracts remain and support an exotic profusion of flora and fauna. A visit to Borneo, a classic Asian bird tour if ever there was one, offers the chance to see the island's rich and varied

birdlife, which includes many endemic species, ranging from trogons to broadbills and from black-eyes to bristleheads, and also numerous other species restricted to the Indo-Malayan faunal subregion.

During this exciting journey we shall explore the state of Sabah in northern Borneo, which is politically part of Malaysia, visiting several very different areas in which almost all of Borneo's avian endemics can be found.

Our journey commences at Kota Kinabalu, the provincial capital, but we shall pause only briefly here before heading off into the interior for a visit to Kinabalu Park. The majestic, rugged massif of Mount Kinabalu rises to 4101m, towering above the surrounding lowlands. Kinabalu dwarfs all other mountains in Borneo and the temperate climate at higher levels has resulted in the evolution of many endemic plants and animals. We should see many of Borneo's specialities here, ranging from such spectacular species as Whitehead's Trogon and Whitehead's Broadbill to the highly localized Friendly Bush Warbler.

Subsequently we will descend to Poring Hot Springs, a locale famous for two rarely seen specialities, Hose's Broadbill and Blue-banded Pitta, and then explore wetlands and grasslands close to Kota Kinabalu and also the Rafflesia Forest Reserve in the Crocker Range before flying across to the east coast.

The high point of our journey through the eastern lowlands will be our stay in the beautiful Danum Valley Conservation Area. Here we will visit primary lowland rainforest with its rich avifauna, and we could well see a wild Orang-utan, the king of the Bornean jungle, moving through this superb forest. Notable birds include several species of hornbill, Black-and-crimson and Blue-headed Pittas, Bornean and Black-throated Wren-Babblers, and the enigmatic Bornean Bristlehead (now elevated to monotypic family status).

We will then move on to Sukau, from where we will visit the huge caves at Gomantong, home of literally millions of bats and swiftlets, and look for Storm's Stork and the curious Proboscis Monkey along the forest-fringed Kinabatangan River. We even have a fair chance of the elusive Bornean Ground-Cuckoo here.

We will finish our adventure at the Sepilok reserve near Sandakan which has become world famous for its rehabilitated Orang-utans, which can provide some extraordinarily close and highly memorable encounters.

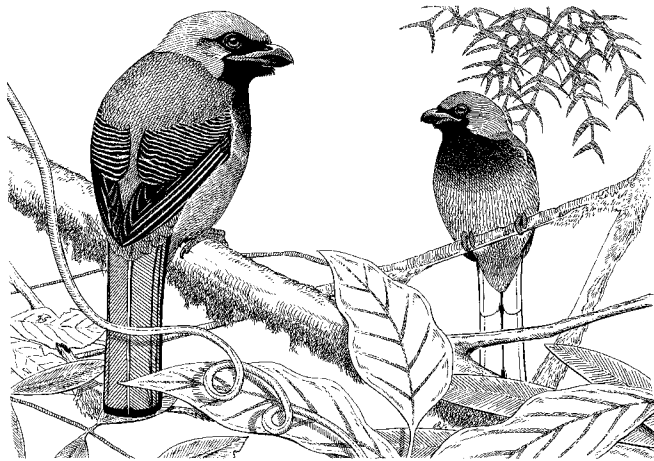
The reserve also offers an even higher chance for seeing Bornean Bristlehead than does Danum Valley. By the end of our travels we will certainly appreciate why Borneo is considered such an important area by conservationists, for its fauna and flora are remarkable indeed.

Birdquest has operated tours to Borneo since 1987.

Itinerary

Day 1 The tour begins this morning at Kota Kinabalu in Sabah in northern Borneo. Surprisingly modern, the city was completely rebuilt after Allied bombing in the Second World War and has grown greatly in recent decades, but on its outskirts there still remain some small areas of tidal mudflats and lagoons. Here we will carefully check through the Great, Little and Pacific Reef Egrets in case we are lucky enough to find an over-summering Chinese Egret (a globally threatened species). Other species we may see in this habitat include White-browed Crake, Common Moorhen, Spotted and Zebra (or Peaceful) Doves, Glossy Swiftlet, House Swift, Pacific Swallow, Yellow-vented Bulbul, White-breasted Wood Swallow, Asian Glossy Starling and Eurasian Tree Sparrow. After lunch we will drive to Kinabalu Park for a three nights stay. As the road winds up from the hot and humid lowlands, Mount Kinabalu slips in and out of view and, indeed, is typically blanketed in clouds in the afternoon.





Whitehead's Trogons (Craig Robson)

Almost all of the land along our route is cultivated, but eventually we will enter the park, which protects some very extensive tracts of forest, and begin our exploration of this superb area.

Days 2-3 The immense bare granite massif of Mount Kinabalu (4101m) towers high above the forests clothing its lower slopes. Although the summit is frequently cloaked in low cloud and mist, it is generally visible in the early morning, allowing stunning views. Mount Kinabalu is a naturalist's paradise – an island of montane forest amongst a sea of cultivated lowlands. Millions of years of isolation have resulted in a high degree of endemism amongst the fauna and especially the flora – over half the plant species above 1000m are endemic, and there are perhaps 600 species of orchids on the mountain and no less than nine species of the extraordinary pitcher-plants. Two-thirds of Borneo's endemic birds are found here, one of which, the Friendly Bush Warbler, is found only on Kinabalu and neighbouring peaks. With increasing altitude, there is a succession of different forest types. Above 1200m true montane forest commences; initially dominated by oaks and chestnuts with a dense ground cover, this gradually

gives way to cloud forest characterized by gnarled, stunted trees (including many rhododendrons) encrusted with mosses, lichens and orchids nourished by the frequent mist and high rainfall. Finally, above the treeline, there is an open subalpine zone of bushes and dwarf shrubs below the formidable crags and gigantic rock buttresses of the summit. We will be based at the park headquarters, where, at 1563m in the lower montane zone, the climate is pleasantly temperate and there is an excellent network of roads and forest trails. Over the next few days birdwatching at Kinabalu will take on a familiar pattern, with the majority of species being fairly conspicuous and easy to see from the roads, but a minority (including some of the most sought-after) being more or less confined to the trails, where the pace is much slower, and birds rather harder to find. A notable feature of the area is the noisy flocks that appear at first light at the roadside. These flocks typically contain Chestnut-hooded (split from Chestnut-capped) and Sunda Laughingthrushes, Ashy and Hair-crested Drongos, the stunning Short-tailed Green Magpie, Bornean Treepie, Indigo Flycatcher, White-throated Fantail and dozens of Chestnut-crested Yuhinas and Black-capped White-

eyes. Other species we may find at Kinabalu include Black Eagle, Blyth's Hawk-Eagle, Little Cuckoo-Dove, Bornean Swiftlet (split from Cave), Sunda Cuckoo (split from Oriental), Golden-naped Barbet, Crimson-winged and Checker-throated Woodpeckers, Sunda Cuckoo-Shrike, Grey-chinned Minivet, Ochraceous Bulbul, Black-and-crimson Oriole, Grey-throated Babbler, White-browed Shrike-Babbler, Bornean Whistling-Thrush, the skulking White-browed Shortwing, White-crowned Forktail, Mountain Leaf and Yellow-breasted Warblers, Mountain Tailorbird, Eyebrowed Jungle, Indigo, Snowy-browed and Little Pied Flycatchers, Bornean Whistler, Velvet-fronted Nuthatch, Black-sided Flowerpecker and Temminck's Sunbird. In addition, we will make a particular effort to find some of the more elusive endemics, including shy Crimson-headed and Red-breasted Partridges, the vivid, electric-green Whitehead's Broadbill, the sedate and unobtrusive Whitehead's Trogon, Black-breasted Fruit-hunter (or simply Fruit-hunter, once thought to be a triller but now considered to show close affinities with the thrushes), the vociferous Mountain Wren-Babbler and the diminutive Bornean Stubtail (with a song so high pitched that it is barely audible). On one morning we will start along the steep summit trail into the upper montane or 'cloud forest' zone. We will hopefully not have to go too far before we find Friendly Bush Warbler, a bird which often lives up to its name as it can be enticed to within a metre or so (too close for binoculars), as well as Pale-faced Bulbul (split from Flavescent), Sunda Bush Warbler and Mountain Black-eye. An excursion after dark near our chalets should allow us to hear Mountain Scops Owl, but seeing this species is very difficult. The only mammals we are likely to

encounter on Kinabalu are a variety of squirrels (including two species of tiny pygmy squirrels) and tree shrews.

Day 4 After some final birding on Mount Kinabalu we will transfer to Poring Hot Springs, situated at much lower altitudes near the foot of the mountain, for a two nights stay. We will arrive in time for some initial exploration.

Day 5 The hot sulphur springs at Poring were developed by the Japanese in the Second World War and are now a popular tourist attraction. They are surrounded by magnificent lowland rainforest which harbours a good range of birds not found at higher altitudes on the mountain, including Rufous and Maroon Woodpeckers, Red-eyed, Black-headed, Scaly-breasted and Streaked Bulbuls, Moustached Babbler, Oriental Magpie-Robin (of a distinctive, near-black form), Everett's White-eye, Orange-bellied Flowerpecker and Dusky Munia. The star attractions here are two little-known Bornean endemics, the attractive Hose's Broadbill and the stunning Blue-banded Pitta. Both are elusive, so we will need good fortune if we are to set eyes on either of these specialities.

Day 6 After spending the early morning at Poring Hot Springs we will drive northwards to an extensive area of wetlands and grasslands near Kota Belud which will provide us with a completely different selection of birds to those we have come used to. Here we will be looking for Purple and Striated (or Little) Herons, Javan Pond Heron, Eastern Cattle and Intermediate Egrets, Yellow and Cinnamon Bitterns, Black-shouldered Kite, White-breasted Waterhen, Black-backed Swamphen, Pacific Golden Plover, Red-necked and Long-toed Stints, Black-winged Stilt, Oriental Pratincole, Whiskered Tern,



Black-breasted Fruit-hunter (Craig Robson)

Lesser Coucal, Asian Palm Swift, Collared Kingfisher, Blue-throated Bee-eater, Barn Swallow, Pied Triller, Striated Warbler, Yellow-bellied Prinia, Pied Fantail, Paddyfield Pipit, Olive-backed Sunbird and Chestnut Munia. With luck, we will also find Watercock, a species only recently confirmed to be breeding in Borneo, Buff-banded Rail (another recent colonist) and possibly Greater Painted-Snipe. Later we will continue to Kota Kinabalu for an overnight stay.

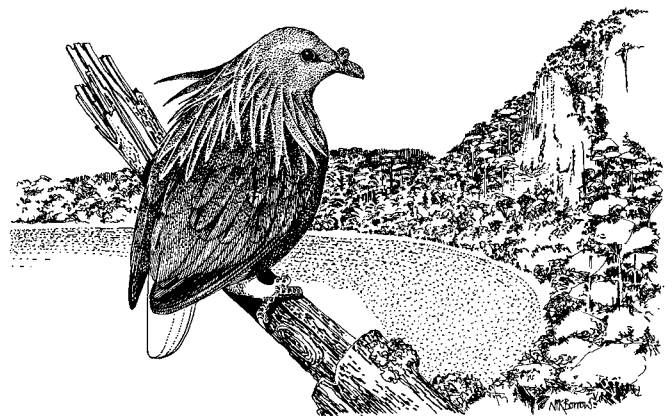
Day 7 This morning we will make an early start for the Rafflesia Forest Reserve, situated in the Crocker Range to the south of Kota Kinabalu. The Crocker Range shares many of Borneo's montane endemics with Mount Kinabalu, but this area, lying at middle altitudes, offers better opportunities for seeing a few species which are often hard to find at Kinabalu itself. In particular, we will be looking for the endemic Bornean and Mountain Barbets, Bornean Leafbird (split from Blue-winged), Cinereous (split from Ashy) and Bornean (split from Black-crested) Bulbuls, Bare-headed Laughingthrush and Whitehead's Spiderhunter, and we will also have another chance to find the stunning

Whitehead's Broadbill. Other species we may find include Mountain Imperial Pigeon, Ruddy Cuckoo-Dove and Temminck's Babbler. The *Rafflesia* itself, which produces the world's largest flower, is capricious in its flowering and it lasts just a few days, so we would be lucky indeed to come across one of these giant blooms. Later we will return to Kota Kinabalu and, if time permits, will search an area of coastal casuarina trees for three introduced species: Blue-naped Parrot, Crested Myna and Java Sparrow. We may also find Sunda Woodpecker and House Crow, the latter a very recent arrival in Borneo. We will then catch a flight to Lahad Datu on the east coast before transferring to the famous Danum Valley Conservation Area for a four nights stay.

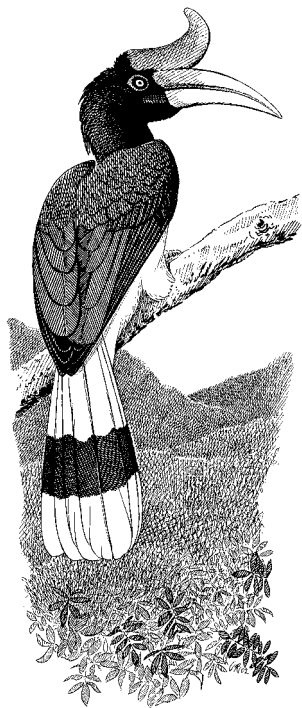
Days 8-10 The Danum Valley Conservation Area contains some of the most accessible untouched lowland rainforest in Sabah (and indeed in the whole of Borneo). Gigantic trees (some reaching over 80m tall, creating the tallest canopy of any rainforest), clambering lianas, spectacular butterflies, strange-looking insects and a bewildering variety of birds are all integral features of this superbly-balanced and stable environment – the

end-product of millions of years of evolution. Rainforests are the richest habitat on earth and those of South-east Asia are the richest of all. There are more tree species here than in Amazonia and this floristic wealth has a profound influence on the avifauna. Many bird families reach their greatest diversity in rainforests such as this, different species adapting to different modes of life whether in the sunlit canopy or on the gloomy forest floor. Our lodge is situated near the banks of the Danum River and is surrounded by forest. As dawn breaks an ethereal mist hangs over the trees, but as the sun slowly rises this starts to lift, and the chorus of broadbills, babbler, bulbuls and White-crowned Shamas is soon joined by the superbly evocative bubbles and trills of Bornean Gibbons as each of the local family groups greets the new day with their song. The numerous flowering and fruiting trees around the lodge attract a good variety of birds, and in just a few minutes we can access an excellent network of trails which will lead us deep into the shade of the forest, where sound becomes an all-important means to locate birds. Danum Valley hosts a superb selection of species, and we have an excellent chance of finding many of the local specialities. These include the gorgeous Blue-headed Pitta, a bird which very much lives up to the old

name for the family of 'jewel thrush' as it bounds over the forest floor. In contrast, the distinctive Black-and-crimson or Black-crowned) Pitta (split from Garnet) sits calling in the deepest shadows, glowing like a hot coal. With luck we will find a Bornean Wren-Babbler walking like a miniature rail over the ground, whilst its close relative, the stocky Black-throated Wren-Babbler, ascends into the trees to scold us. Perhaps the greatest prize is, however, the strange Bornean Bristlehead (now elevated to its own monotypic family), and we will hope to hear its strange whistles and growls coming from the canopy and then catch sight of a party of these strawberry-headed enigmas moving through the tree tops. The most spectacular of Danum's birds are surely the hornbills, and the raucous trumpeting of Rhinoceros Hornbills as a party flies overhead should become a familiar sound. Helmeted Hornbills are also very vocal, giving a succession of 'too hoop' notes culminating in a manic 'chop-your-mother-in-law-down' crescendo, but they are often much shyer and harder to get views of. Other hornbill species at Danum include Bushy-crested, Wreathed and Asian Black. Another vocal species is Great Argus, whose call can be heard from well over a kilometre away. This largest of all the pheasants is usually difficult to see, but occasionally one



Nicobar Pigeon (Nik Borrow)



Rhinoceros Hornbill
(Craig Robson)

of the Danum males becomes surprisingly tame, making for a better chance of seeing this improbable bird with its outrageous train of elongated wing feathers. At the opposite end of the scale, we will hope to see the tiny Pygmy White-eye, a species so small and drab that until very recently it was completely overlooked here! More glamorous are the flycatchers, and we have a good chance of finding the two local specialities, Large-billed Blue and Bornean Blue Flycatchers. Amongst the many other species we may encounter here are Oriental Honey Buzzard, Rufous-bellied and Crested Serpent Eagles, Wallace's Hawk-Eagle, White-fronted Falconet, Emerald Dove, Blue-crowned Hanging-Parrot, Violet and Plaintive Cuckoos, Raffles's, Red-billed and Chestnut-breasted Malkohas, Greater Coucal, Brown-backed Needletail, Silver-rumped Swift, Grey-rumped and Whiskered Treeswifts, Diard's, Red-naped and Scarlet-rumped Trogons, Black-backed Kingfisher,

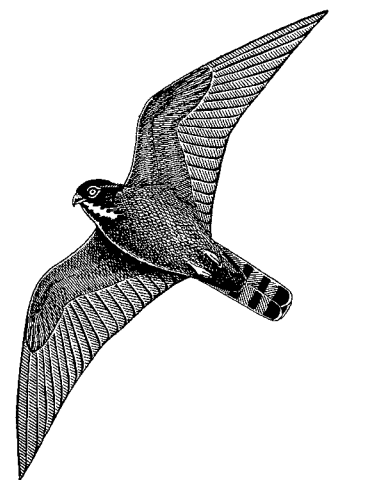
Red-bearded Bee-eater, Dollarbird, Gold-whiskered, Red-throated, Yellow-crowned, Blue-eared and Brown Barbets, Rufous, Buff-rumped, Buff-necked, Grey-capped, Grey-and-buff and Orange-backed Woodpeckers, Black-and-yellow, Banded and Green Broadbills, Black-winged Flycatcher-Shrike, Lesser Cuckoo-Shrike, Large Wood-Shrike, Fiery and Scarlet Minivets, Green Iora, Lesser Green and Greater Green Leafbirds, Grey-bellied, Spectacled, Puff-backed, Grey-cheeked, Yellow-bellied, Hairy-backed and Buff-vented Bulbuls, Asian Fairy-Bluebird, Greater Racket-tailed and Bronzed Drongos, Dark-throated Oriole, Crested Jay, Bornean Black Magpie (split from Black), Slender-billed Crow, Rufous-fronted, Black-capped, Short-tailed, Ferruginous, Horsfield's, Sooty-capped, Rufous-crowned, Scaly-crowned, Chestnut-rumped and Chestnut-winged Babblers, Striped Wren-Babbler, Bold-striped Tit-Babbler (split from Striped Tit-Babbler and restricted to Borneo and Java), Fluffy-backed Tit-Babbler, Brown Fulvetta, White-bellied Yuhina, Rufous-tailed Shama, Dark-necked, Ashy and Rufous-tailed Tailorbirds, Verditer and Grey-headed Flycatchers, Black-naped Monarch, Maroon-breasted and Rufous-winged Philentomas, Spotted Fantail, Yellow-rumped and Yellow-breasted Flowerpeckers, Plain, Plain-throated, Red-throated, Ruby-cheeked and Purple-naped Sunbirds, Streaky-breasted, Little, Spectacled and Yellow-eared Spiderhunters, and Common Hill Myna. We should also find some of the scarcer or harder to see species, which include the stately Great-billed Heron, Lesser Fish Eagle, the secretive Chestnut-necklaced Partridge, Crested Fireback, Jambu Fruit Dove, Banded Bay and Drongo Cuckoos, Blue-banded and Banded Kingfishers, Olive-backed Woodpecker,

White-crowned Hornbill, the strange Dusky Broadbill, Black-and-white and Finsch's Bulbuls, Chestnut-backed Scimitar-Babbler, Chestnut-naped Forktail, Rufous-chested Flycatcher, Purple-throated Sunbird, Thick-billed Spiderhunter, and Thick-billed and Yellow-vented Flowerpeckers. During our stay at Danum Valley we will have the opportunity for several nocturnal excursions, and have an excellent chance of finding Buffy Fish Owl and Brown Wood Owl. Many mammals inhabit the reserve and some of the species that we could see during a night excursion include Greater Mouse-Deer, Lesser Mouse-Deer, Sambar Deer and Thomas's and Red Giant Flying Squirrels. With luck we could also see one or two of the scarcer species, which include Common Palm and Malay Civets, and Leopard Cat. The reserve also has one of the largest populations of Orang-utans in Borneo and we have a good chance of seeing these magnificent apes in their forest kingdom, a truly thrilling sight. Other primates include Pigtail Macaque, the beautiful Red Leaf Monkey and Bornean Gibbon.

Day 11 After a final morning at Danum Valley we will

return to Lahad Datu and continue to Sukau for a three nights stay.

Days 12-13 During our stay at Sukau we will visit the famous Gomantong Caves. This huge cave system, penetrating far inside a massive limestone outcrop, is probably the largest in Sabah and is the home of literally millions of swiftlets and bats. Leaving the bright sunshine behind, we will enter a cool world of perpetual darkness with its own very different ecosystem ranging from tiny mites to spectacular long-legged centipedes. Inside the cavernous, cathedral-sized main cave we will be able to watch Black-nest, Mossy-nest and Glossy Swiftlets, and perhaps Edible-nest Swiftlets, on their noticeably differing nests, the only really safe way to tell them apart! Ropes suspended from the roof of the cave and flimsy bamboo scaffolding have been used for a thousand years to collect the nests of Edible-nest and Black-nest Swiftlets for soup, although nowadays the nests can only be collected after the breeding season. At dusk, clouds of bats emerge from the caves like swarms of mosquitoes and several Bat Hawks are usually in attendance to



Bat Hawk and prey (Craig Robson)



Whitehead's Broadbill (Craig Robson)

prey on them; indeed this is one of the most reliable places to see this interesting and elusive raptor. They are often accompanied by one or two Peregrine Falcons of the rather dark local race, and it is surprising how similar these two raptors can appear in flight, as the Peregrines catch bats too. The small forest reserve surrounding the caves is rich in birds. Here we shall be hoping to see Black-throated Babbler as well as a range of raptors, trogons, hornbills and other species already mentioned for Danum Valley. While based at our riverside lodge, we will also explore some of the shadier and quieter stretches of the local rivers by boat in search of the extraordinary Proboscis Monkey, which is endemic to Borneo. As well as this bizarre creature, surely one of the most unlikely

simians of all, we have another chance of Orang-utan. The flood-plain forests at Sukau hold a wealth of birds and we will be looking in particular for the highly localized Wrinkled Hornbill, the rare and enigmatic Storm's Stork, the uncommon Jerdon's Baza and even the retiring Bornean Ground-Cuckoo (which takes a lot of luck to see). On one morning we will make an early start so that we can arrive at the forest before dawn. We will be hoping to hear the rather crow-like cawing of the Sunda Frogmouth and, with luck, catch sight of this elusive species sitting high above us under the forest canopy. Amongst the other species we may see are Oriental Darter, Black-crowned Night Heron, Brahminy Kite, White-bellied Sea Eagle, Crested Goshawk, Green Imperial Pigeon,

Little and Thick-billed Green Pigeons, Emerald Dove, Long-tailed Parakeet, Blue-eared and Stork-billed Kingfishers, Oriental Pied Hornbill, the huge Great Slaty and White-bellied Woodpeckers, Black-and-red Broadbill, Straw-headed, Cream-vented and Olive-winged Bulbuls, Common Iora, White-chested Babbler, Malaysian Blue Flycatcher, Asian Paradise-Flycatcher and Crimson Sunbird. We also have a good chance of finding Hooded Pitta, a characteristic species of the riverside forests, and scarcer species may include Lesser Adjutant and Grey-headed Fish Eagle.

Day 14 After some final birding at Sukau we will drive to the Sepilok Reserve near Sandakan for an overnight stay. We should arrive in time for some initial exploration.

Day 15 Although nowadays very popular with all kinds of visitors to eastern Sabah, because of its famous Orang-utan feeding sessions, the Sepilok Reserve remains a very good place for birds. We will have another opportunity here to look for many species typical of the lowlands, and in particular Bornean Bristlehead, should we have been unusually unlucky at Danum Valley. As the species is nowadays treated as the sole member of its family, it is definitely not a bird that anyone wants to miss, and it is probably more easily observed at Sepilok than anywhere else. We will surely want to enjoy the Orang-utan spectacle

while at Sepilok, watching these gentle creatures emerging from the forest to feed on the provided fruit. They come extraordinarily close (sometimes too close for some visitors!) and you can take the most wonderful photographs of individuals of both sexes and different ages, sometimes ranging from young babies right up to adults. After lunch we will head for Sandakan airport, where the tour ends this afternoon.

Accommodation & Road

Transport: The hotels/lodges are of normal Birdquest standard almost throughout. At Mount Kinabalu and Poring Hot Springs the accommodation sometimes consists of two-bedroom bungalows that share a single bathroom. The chalets at Sukau are simple but adequate and all rooms have private bathrooms. Road transport is by small coach or minibus and roads are good.

Walking: The walking effort is mostly easy or moderate, but there is one optional fairly arduous walk on Mount Kinabalu.

Climate: At low altitudes mostly hot, dry and sunny, but overcast and rainy weather is not infrequent. On Mount Kinabalu conditions are similar but temperatures range from warm to cool (even fairly cold early in the morning high on Mount Kinabalu). It is often very humid.

Bird/Mammal Photography: Opportunities are worthwhile.