

# Malaysia & Singapore, October & November 2014

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This trip, contrast to most of my trips abroad, was more similar to what normal people call a 'holiday'. With my long-suffering girlfriend, we visited some friends in Penang before driving with them to Fraser's Hill for a few days, before continuing on our own south to Singapore via public transport. We opted for FH rather than Taman Negara as while two of us are keen birders and wildlife enthusiasts, it seemed like a more suitable option for the others. Another thoroughly enjoyable trip to SE Asia, with some great sightings. As well as 37 species of mammals, including 19 new ones, I saw some superb birds and a decent variety of amphibian. For the purposes of this note, I'll omit those to keep the focus on mammal sightings and locations, but should the details of those be of interest feel free to email me for information.

## Penang 16<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> October

I spent most of the time here in urban Georgetown, a rather leafy and pleasant small city with surprisingly good birding and to a lesser extent mammalling; I didn't see anything too earth-shattering but a few nice species.

One morning my friend drove me to Air Itam Dam, an area of forest surrounding a reservoir, which proved excellent for squirrels and monkeys despite large numbers of joggers and cyclists. Following the road south from the car park, and then taking a track which forked off on the left, for c2.5km and back produced great views of **Black Giant Squirrel** (3), abundant **Plantain Squirrels** and **Long-tailed Macaques**, and a troop of **Dusky Langurs**.

It would have been extremely useful to have had bat detecting capabilities on this trip; both Georgetown and Melaka produced large numbers of bats (even more than I'd normally expect in SE Asia), presumably due to the old colonial buildings being excellent habitat. However, on an evening stroll downtown big numbers of **Asian Lesser Yellow House Bats** were emerging from a temple and associated buildings on Jalan Muntri (just NW of the junction with Lorong Love); they were out so early that good views of the pelage could be had through binoculars. A small fruit bat sp was seen several times around the condo block on Gurney Drive.

*Other possibilities:* Smooth Otters are apparently seen regularly around Penang, including south of the Straits Quay Marina Mall NW of Georgetown; I had a brief look at this area with a scope from Gurney Plaza (on Persiaran Gurney, aka Gurney Drive) on morning without success.

We planned to visit Kek Lok Si Temple one evening, ostensibly to see the huge illuminated Buddha, but I was more interested in some sneaky spotlighting; however, I was thwarted by persistent rain. It lies amongst trees on the road up to Air Itam Dam so I would think there's some potential for e.g. palm civets, or even Sunda Slow Loris and Sunda Colugo; both are apparently present on the island. Presumably these species all occur in the National Park and/or Botanic Gardens, neither of which we visited.

A roadkill mongoose sp. was seen on the highway on the mainland side of the southern bridge en route to the next site.

## Fraser's Hill, 19<sup>th</sup> – 23<sup>rd</sup> October

One of the main events of the trip from a wildlife perspective, this well-known site is covered well in many birding trip reports. We drove from Georgetown (c4.5hrs), and stayed at the Shahzan Inn. This has apparently recently come under new management and is recommended; one of my companions had been to FH in April and apparently it's far better than the Puncak Inn nearby. The rooms were slightly musty on arrival but I think this is probably unavoidable in the damp climate here, and staff and food proved excellent.

Most sightings were from the roads (and to a lesser extent trails) around FH itself; we spent one rather unproductive morning at lower altitude on the Old Road.

The first mammal on arrival was superb looks at **White-thighed Langurs**, which were often present right behind the Shahzan Inn, and also seen once at the New Road end of Maxwell Trail. **Dusky Langurs** were seen three times (probably the same troop) on Bishop Trail, Hemmant Trail and Jalan Lady Maxwell (opposite Maur Cottage). **Siamangs** proved a source of frustration; they were heard every day (e.g. New Road, three troops on the old road, two troops below Telekom Loop), and often very close on Jalan High Pines, but were always on the wrong side of a ridge. The latter in fact were just a few trees back at one point but out of view. Eventually we managed a quite brief and distant view of a couple through the scope from Jalan Lady Maxwell near the start of Bishop's Trail. Calling was most intense between 8.30 and 10am, thought they started earlier on a couple of days and were occasionally heard around midday. A **Yellow-throated Marten** gave a brief view - actually, I only saw the back half, the others saw the whole animal - as it crossed the road just uphill from the pub (just around the first sharp bend to the right) at 7.45am on 20<sup>th</sup>.

Commoner species that we turned up in many areas included **Common Treeshrew** and **Western Striped, Slender** and **Grey-bellied & Pallas's Squirrels**. I'm not sure on the relative abundances of the latter two as views weren't always great but we certainly saw both. A pair of **Red-cheeked Squirrels** were seen on a few occasions on the road (Jalan Lady Maxwell) between the Bishop and Hemmant trailheads. **Long-tailed Macaques** were around the Puncak Inn and seen at a few places on the journey from Kuala Kubu Bharu up to The Gap and a couple of **Sunda Pig-tailed Macaques** were along this road on the way down. I had a very brief sighting of a shrew at dawn on Hemmant Trail, close but not enough to attempt an identification.

Based on the amount of scuffed up ground on the golf course and trails, **Wild Boar** must be common. This was rammed home one night when I'd set a couple of Sherman traps under bushes in the front garden of the Shahzan (after two nights of catching nothing behind the hotel), which had mysteriously vanished in the morning. I eventually found one later that afternoon 20m away in a battered, tusk-scarred but salvageable state, but the second was further away and had been opened up like a tin of sardines! Apparently the smell of peanut butter and cereal bars is irresistible to those pigs... The following night I had a wander at 3am at caught a quick look at two boar on the golf course, though they rapidly fled as soon as the spotlight hit them.

Spotlighting on night walks had mixed success; I tried various areas at various times of night, but the only two good sightings were 50m and five minutes apart! After walking down to the gate from the village centre and taking the road on the left (Jalan Mager), we had an excellent **Spotted Giant Flying Squirrel** rapidly followed by superb views of a **Small-toothed Palm Civet** on the ground at the roadside. A return to this area, and the remainder of this road, the following night produced

absolutely nothing. A few bats of at least a couple of species were seen around the streetlights; based on flight patterns, I suspect a horseshoe/roundleaf and probably a myotis.

*Other possibilities* – I was a little surprised not to catch any rodents or shrews around the hotel (although the boar incident clearly didn't help), so a more concerted effort may turn something up. White-handed Gibbons are present on the lower slopes.

Driving the Jeriau Falls, New and Old Roads at night should be productive (although I felt the latter was a bit too enclosed for spotlighting) - Masked Palm Civet and Slow Loris are sometimes seen, Leopard Cat must be present and a Google search turned up a picture of a Pangolin from here. Recent camera trapping near the Bishops Cottage has turned up Clouded Leopard, Marbled Cat and Banded Linsang, while Tiger is still present – apparently a female with cubs was seen a few times earlier in 2014 on the New Road!

### **Kuala Lumpur area, 23<sup>rd</sup>-26<sup>th</sup> October**

We stayed in Bukit Bintang, close to **Bukit Nanas Forest Reserve**, and a couple of short visits turned up a few **Common Treeshrews, Grey-bellied and Plantain Squirrels**. Apparently the macaques and langurs there have been introduced (not that I saw either).

Making an impromptu touristy visit to **Batu Caves** proved an inspired decision. The Dark Cave (<http://www.darkcavemalaysia.com/>, on the left about ¾ of the way up the steps to the temple) is an excellent conservation project run by enthusiastic ecologists who really know their stuff. We took an educational tour (RM35), which lasted just under an hour, late afternoon but they run all day. From what I can gather, 22 species of bats have been recorded here, although only a few can be seen: there's a large colony of **Cave Nectar Bats** viewable at the entrance, while at the far end of the tour **Diadem Roundleaf Bats** and more nectar bats can be seen. We were also lucky enough to have a close encounter with a **Woolly Horseshoe Bat** (*Rhinolophus luctus*), and a *Crocidura* shrew was foraging near the entrance late in the day; according to the staff this is **Malayan Shrew**. Several **Asian House Rats** were also active in the cave, along with a variety of interesting invertebrates. **Long-tailed Macaques** are common outside, pestering tourists. All in all, recommended.

Outside the city, I was able to visit **Bukit Tinggi**, in the Genting Highlands, Pahang State as a friend kindly offered to give me a lift one morning. This is a rather strange site about 55kms NNE of downtown KL – apparently Southeast Asia's only Japanese style tea garden and resort with some French-inspired architecture! – but set in good hill forest at a lower altitude than Fraser's Hill. It was here I finally had the **Siamang** experience that I was after; many groups were calling and we were able to get fantastic close views of a family group singing in the Botanic Garden at around 9am. This area produced good views of **Cream-coloured Giant Squirrel**, while we also saw a couple each of unidentified **Pallas's, Western Striped and Plantain Squirrel** and **Common Treeshrew**. A single **Sunda Pig-tailed Macaque** was seen along the highway (E8) on the way from KL.

*Other possibilities* – I'm not aware of too much else in the city; Masked Palm Civet has been seen at Bukit Tinggi, and presumably it shares a lot of species with Fraser's. Unfortunately I couldn't squeeze in a visit to Kuala Selangor, so Selangor Silvered Langur will have to wait until next time!

## Melaka, 26<sup>th</sup>-28<sup>th</sup> October

As expected, very few mammals were seen (or looked for), but close views were obtained one night of an **Asian House Shrew** on the riverside path underneath the Jalan Kampung Pantai roadbridge. Plenty of bats, this time it would appear mostly pipistrelles, emerged from the shophouses in the colonial district prior to dusk, and a medium sized fruit-type bat nearly collided with us on a bridge over the river one evening! Incidentally, the Common Water Monitors here grow to a particularly impressive size!

A couple of early morning birding sessions at Bukit Cina produced a few more **Plaintain Squirrels**. This area of grassland with scattered trees on a low hill (an old Chinese cemetery) just east of the colonial part of the city could be worth more exploration, particularly at night; I found a few fairly sizeable mammal burrows, although I'm not sure what could have made them.

## Panti Forest Reserve, 30<sup>th</sup> & 31<sup>st</sup> October

Another trip highlight, particularly from a birding point of view, but also with some good mammals. This fragment of lowland rainforest is in the state of Johor, NNE of Kota Tinggi, with access centred around the driveable 8km long bunker trail. The forest is largely secondary, with some patches of swamp forest, for the first 5km, and primary (with slight change in species composition) after that. Excellent, still up-to-date, access information is at

<http://www.dutchbirding.nl/~dbaftp/wietze/Panti%20Forest,%20Malaysia,%202009%20-%20Remco%20Hofland.pdf>

I was very fortunate in that I was able to travel to the site with an ecologist contact from Singapore; this made the logistics and location of wildlife much easier. We stayed at the very reasonable Rest Inn Hotel in Kota Tinggi; others have stayed at the Rainforest Resort, which is further from the main trail but seems like it could produce some interesting stuff on site. In theory permits are required for Panti - I haven't heard of any birders running into issues through not having them, but we did meet some rangers who apparently do check this on occasion. Being regular visitors, my companions knew the guys so we had no problems. We had two mornings (pre-dawn until 12.30pm) and a late afternoon/evening here, leaving to get food at either the Chinese or Indian cafes a few km back down the main road, or in Kota Tinggi itself.

Six species of primate were recorded here. The best was a **Sunda Slow Loris** picked up by eyeshine on the night drive back to the main road. **Dusky Langurs** were seen several times, with one sighting of the localised nominate subspecies of **Banded Langur**. **Long-tailed Macaques** were typically frequently encountered, but we only ran into **Sunda Pig-tailed Macaque** in the forest on one occasion. **White-handed Gibbons** were frequently heard and should be easy to see (I didn't try very hard and still managed a couple of quick looks).

There was abundant evidence of pigs; **Wild Boar** are the common ungulate here, albeit shy, and we saw two run across the trail mid-morning on 31<sup>st</sup>. More exciting was relatively brief but good view of three adult and several juvenile **Bearded Pigs** c6km into the forest the previous afternoon. Another highlight was a **Horse-tailed Squirrel** on a side trail c5km along the Bunker Trail – apparently not recorded here that often and one I'd only seen once, in 2005! This area also produced the only **Shrew-faced Ground Squirrel**; **Three-striped Ground Squirrels** were seen fairly regularly crossing the track, along with a **Common Treeshrew**. **Lesser Treeshrew** is present in the primary forest areas. The commonest squirrel seen was **Slender**, with good number both days. **Plaintain** was seen near

the main road, but is replaced by **Sunda Black-banded Squirrel** in the tall forest; all three of my sightings were after the 5km mark.

I was taken to a roost of **Lesser Sheath-tailed Bats**, with excellent (scope!) views of 11 obtained. Whilst quite easy to find, my impression is that this would be an easy roost to disturb so I'm loth to put it in the public domain, but if anyone is visiting the site then drop me an email & I'd be happy to give directions. A few other species in the evening were as usual not identified.

*Other possibilities* – The guys I was with reckon that Short-tailed Mongoose is pretty common, as is Low's Squirrel, although I may have overlooked the latter amongst the Slenders. We saw reasonably recently-dropped Asian Elephant dung, and apparently they are seen semi-regularly. Tiger and Sun Bear also cling on. <http://pantiforestreserve.blogspot.co.uk/2012/08/mammals-of-panti.html> has a list, though it's apparently not fully accurate.

### **Singapore, 28<sup>th</sup>-29th October and 31<sup>st</sup> October- 2<sup>nd</sup> November**

Although not the first choice for wildlife-watching, Singapore seemed surprisingly good and I actually wouldn't have minded another day or two! Two sites proved well worth a visit from a mammalling perspective.

Firstly, I visited the **Botanic Gardens** early morning on 29<sup>th</sup>. From Chinatown I was able to get the first bus to arrive just after 6am, by which time the decent numbers of bats around the lights were almost outnumbered by joggers and other early arriving human visitors. Near the Ginger Garden prior to full daylight I had good views of 5+ **bamboo bats** and several other myotis-types; later it was confirmed to me that the former roost in good numbers in that area (although I'm not sure whether it's Lesser, Greater or both), and that **Asian Whiskered Myotis** is common. Not really good enough to tick, but still. **Cynopterus brachyotis** (I'm not sure which of this fruit bat's many English names is best!) is common, and after a helpful member of staff pointed out three roosting under palm leaves I found my own group along the quieter paths at the north end of Swan Lake; this area also held two **Common Treeshrews**, while **Plantain Squirrels** were again common. Two rats seen at the edge of Symphony Lake looked like **Norway** rather than **Asian House Rat**, a few of which were seen near the entrance. The biggest surprise came as I was leaving at 8.45am, and with the gardens very busy, a **Smooth Otter** popped up in Swan Lake and put on a great show for five minutes. I found out that this was the first ever sighting of otter at this site, and still present the next day at least.

On 31<sup>st</sup>, on the basis of some posts on mammalwatching.com, we decided to visit the **Night Safari** at Singapore Zoo -as zoos go, an excellent set-up, with large, almost forested enclosures rather than cages. As hoped, no-one minded me shining a torch around the tall trees, and after a little searching we found a couple of **Sunda Colugos**; one in particular gave excellent views low down above the Striped Hyenas. A smallish rodent high up in the canopy went unidentified, but we saw plenty on the ground – most, if not all, rats were **Asian House Rats**, while a couple of **Asian House Mice** were in with the pangolins!

Elsewhere, I just managed a handful of **Plantain Squirrels** in greener parts of the city.

*Other possibilities* – The only other species I thought was a reasonable possibility was Common Palm Civet at the Night Safari. I was hoping to find time to have a look for Indo-Pacific Humpback and Indo-Pacific Bottlenose Dolphins, but used up all my credit on staying overnight at Panti! A good resource is <http://sgwildanimals.blogspot.co.uk/>, and it seems reasonably up-to-date.