

Trip Report – South-East Asia, Nov/Dec 2010 and Jan 2011

This wasn't really a wildlife-focussed part of our travels, but as we toured through Thailand, Cambodia, Thailand again, Malaysia and Singapore we did visit some specific locations: (1) Hala Bala in southern Thailand, to look for hairy-nosed otters, (2) Khao Sok in southern Thailand, (3) Langkawi and Penang in Malaysia to look for otters.

In the north of Thailand we found lesser horseshoe bats on a caving trip near the famous cave of Tham Lod. We visited Doi Inthanon NP as well, but found that with no inside information and no guide the Thai national parks are really not set up for wildlife watchers. In Ayutthaya we found variable squirrels among the temple ruins. On a side-trip to Cambodia we found a roost of Lyle's flying foxes in a temple compound.

We visited Hala Bala for six days with Jan and Tu, and I have to echo Jon's previous comments – they are superb wildlife guides, and know the whole of Thailand inside-out. Our target here was the hairy-nosed otter and the small-clawed otter, but we did find time for one night drive which picked up common palm civet, sunda slow loris, sunda colugo, red giant flying squirrel, small-toothed palm civet and a lone Asian elephant crossing the road, which was a first for Jan and Tu in Hala Bala as well. During the days we saw agile gibbons, white-thighed langur and dusky langur but they were brief glimpses.

We ended up spending 34 hours in the tiny hide perched over the flooded forest that you can read about in Jon's report, and although it never got quite as hot we did have torrential rain on two days and hordes of mosquitoes when we arrived pre-dawn. I cannot possibly recommend this activity! We saw long-tailed macaques and plantain squirrels while waiting, and on the third and fourth days were awarded with short glimpses of a hairy-nosed otter, which we got a photo of on the second sighting. It was a privilege to be able to see a Critically Endangered animal in its environment, but Jan and Tu tell us that they'd prefer not to disturb the research at Hala Bala again and so probably won't offer this to any other visitors. We spent a mere 9 hours in the small-clawed otter hide, and had an even more fleeting glimpse of two oriental small-clawed otters in the stream.

Khao Sok was a fun trip, staying in very rudimentary floating bungalows on the lake and looking for wildlife by kayak and longtail boat. We saw southern pig-tailed macaques as well as good views of dusky langur and white-handed gibbons singing. There were also plenty of wild Eurasian boars and close views of gaur. On our final day we went into the Khlong Saeng reserve, another part of the lake requiring special permission to visit, and there we saw literally dozens of boar, four big herds of gaur, plenty of red muntjac and sambar deer and a very brief glimpse of a sunda pangolin in daylight. I think a dedicated trip here and spotlighting from longtail might bring great results.

We went snorkelling on Ko Surin, but an Indomalayan nivist invaded our bungalow. On Ko Yao Noi we attracted sunda short-nosed fruit bats by hanging bananas on our balcony and saw a roost of island flying foxes in the beautiful secret lagoon of Ko Roi.

We stopped on Penang in Malaysia to look for smooth-coated otters and managed to follow one

along the coast for 10 minutes at Pulau Pinang NP on Pantai Keratchut beach. We also saw giant black squirrels and plantain squirrels on the same beach.

Langkawi was a surprise location. We found photos of small-clawed otters online and contacted JungleWalla (<http://junglewalla.com>). They put us in touch with their guide Indera and we hopped a ferry for a lightning 24 hour visit, one afternoon and one morning. Indera took us to half-a-dozen known locations for otters, and we saw fresh activity at four of them. We got our sighting of three oriental small-clawed otters crossing a stream just behind a resort on the west of the island. We also saw giant black and sunda black-striped squirrel here, and in a cave were two species of roundleaf bats, great and intermediate. There's clearly a healthy population of otters on Langkawi using very accessible locations, and I think spending 2 days here with Indera would almost certainly give a sighting. He even knew of a holt almost within sight of his house, but that pair were shot by fish farmers just a week before we came!

And if you need a location for smooth-coated otters, try Sungei Buloh wetland reserve on Singapore, our last stop. There's a pond right outside the visitor centre and a pair of otters slept, played and tormented water monitor lizards there for three hours while we watched. Currently they are there almost daily, and three generations have been using the pond.

Complete list for the South-East Asia leg of our year around the world
(31 mammals in 8 weeks, all new to our life list except smooth-coated otter, muntjac, boar and elephant)

Smooth-coated otter
Wild boar
Asian elephant
Dusky langur
Variable squirrel
Lesser horseshoe bat
Plantain squirrel
Long-tailed macaque
Sunda slow loris
Sunda colugo
Red giant flying squirrel
Small-toothed palm civet
Common palm civet
Agile gibbon
Oriental small-clawed otter
White-thighed langur
Hairy-nosed otter
Southern pig-tailed macaque
Gaur
Sambar
Red muntjac
Sunda pangolin

Indomalayan niviventer
Sunda short-nosed fruit bat
Island flying fox
Black giant squirrel
Sunda black-striped squirrel
White-handed gibbon
Lyle's flying fox
Great roundleaf bat
Intermediate roundleaf bat