

SABAH REVISITED : 13-25 APRIL 2007

Richard Webb & Phil Telfer

Introduction

Having managed to see all the world's big cat species other than the two forms of Clouded Leopard a return trip to Sabah seemed the best way to try to fill the void. Ultimately the trip was unsuccessful in that Clouded Leopard remains elusive despite 33 hours spotlighting & a whole night sitting overlooking the mud volcano in Tabin although Flat-headed Cat was my 23rd species of cat & we saw 33 species of mammal in total so the trip was still largely enjoyable.

Phil organised the logistics for Tabin & Danum Valley (Borneo Rainforest Lodge) through Intra-Travel in Kota Kinabalu who despite providing assurances about a number of items failed to provide exactly what we asked for. They did however manage to change our booking while we were there to leave Tabin a day early so did make some amends for failing to deliver what they had promised. The eight nights cost approximately £900 per person including:

- all accommodation & meals
- all transfers
- standard night drives at Tabin
- 5 four-hour night drives at Borneo Rainforest Lodge (see below for further details) &
- a ridiculous additional charge for staying overnight at the mud volcano

I organised the Kinabatangan River section directly with Robert Chong (see details below)

Richard Webb

Sites

Tabin

Tabin is a protected area with a superb mammal list including Clouded Leopard, Sumatran Rhino & Sun Bear. Unfortunately the main core area where most of the goodies are is 25 kms or so from Tabin Wildlife Resort where you stay and the area in the immediate vicinity of the lodge is sub-standard secondary forest bordered by palm plantations. Nevertheless it still contains a good range of species. There is the opportunity to spend several days tracking rhinos in the core area but from what I can make out they only see them once or twice a year so it's probably not really worth the effort.

Tabin Wildlife Resort overlooking the river provides accommodation for up to 70 people in comfortable chalets. The restaurant provides oriental meals although there is a limited a la carte menu offering sandwiches, french fries, fried chicken etc for those preferring western food. You are provided with a guide but ours although keen was very poor having only been there a few months. It appears that Danny is the best guide if you can get him.

The price includes 90-minute night drives along the main approach road. These were very good as many of the mammals seen were in the plantations where the lack of ground cover enables you to obtain excellent views. Leopard Cats are common & other species likely to be seen include Malay Civet, Common Palm Civet, Malayan Porcupine, Lesser Mouse Deer, Sambar & Bearded Pig (common). Although Clouded Leopards have been encountered along this road it is further from the lodge than the night drives normally go as the night drives only go 5 km or so. If the lodge was to offer longer night drives particularly along the road past the mud volcano the rewards could be greater especially as we found fresh Sun Bear droppings along the latter road & Sun Bear had been seen at the mud volcano a couple of days before our visit.

The lodge offers early morning drives along the same road at extra cost but ours left too late in the morning to be worthwhile although we did see Bornean Gibbon & Bearded Pigs.

There is also the opportunity to spend the night, at extra cost, in the observation tower overlooking the mud volcano. We did this & saw Sambar, Bearded Pig & Thomas's Flying Squirrel & there were 2 Orang Utans in trees behind the tower at dawn the following morning. Sun Bear, Clouded Leopard & 'Borneo Pygmy' Elephant have all been seen here so it does have potential. However the mud volcanos in the core area are probably far better. If you do decide to overnight here ensure that adequate mossie netting is provided as we got bitten to pieces!

There are also a number of trails around the lodge. The two that we walked were poorly maintained & consequently difficult to work. We did however see Bornean Gibbon & two species of treeshrew along Sambar Trail & Low's & Plain Pygmy Squirrels around the lodge itself. Elephants had been seen near the lodge two days prior to our arrival & otters are occasionally seen along the river.

Overall we were disappointed with Tabin & left a day early although with slightly more flexibility around the night drives it clearly has huge potential.

Borneo Rainforest Lodge

Borneo Rainforest Lodge is probably the best place in the world to see Clouded Leopard although you still need considerable luck whether on a night drive, walking the trails or on drives in and out of the lodge.

Having visited BRL in 2003, the spotlighting this time around was slightly disappointing but overall the 5 days there were excellent. Since my previous visit the lodge seems to have become more flexible. In the past you had to walk the trails with a guide but our guide William Baroh was happy for us to walk the trails alone which was a bonus. William is generally an excellent guide & of the guides available is the most experienced & most flexible. He did however seem to be lacking enthusiasm when we were there possibly because he had been guiding continuously for 3 weeks without a day off.

The lodge offers comfortable chalets, some with fridges, & buffet-style meals. Breakfasts generally have a western bias but other meals are distinctly oriental with few options for those preferring western food. The lodge is growing rapidly & it will be interesting to see what impact the increased numbers of people visiting the area has on the wildlife.

The morning walks generally start about 0615 although I tended to be out spotlighting between 0430 & 0500 & generally saw very few people out in the field before breakfast. You generally return for breakfast about 0800 (breakfast is officially from 0700-0800) & then go out again after breakfast. Lunch is from 1200-1330.

Guided afternoon walks start around 1530 returning about 1800.

The package includes a nightly 90-minute spotlighting drive along the 4-km approach road where they regularly see Slow Loris & Flying Squirrels. One drive also produced Banded Palm Civet & Long-tailed Porcupine while we were there. You can also take spotlighting walks on the trails where you have a better chance of seeing Western Tarsier.

You can also take extended night drives at additional cost & we did five four-hour drives to increase our chances of seeing cats etc. The cost of a four hour drive is 150 ringitts per person (c.£23) with a minimum of two people & a maximum of four. Additional hours are 37.50 ringitts per person per hour.

You can also take extended night drives of between one & four hours at an additional cost of 37.50 ringitts per person per hour with a minimum of two people.

All the vehicles only use one spotlight powered from the battery of the vehicle but if you take your own you can plug a second into the cigarette lighter giving you better coverage.

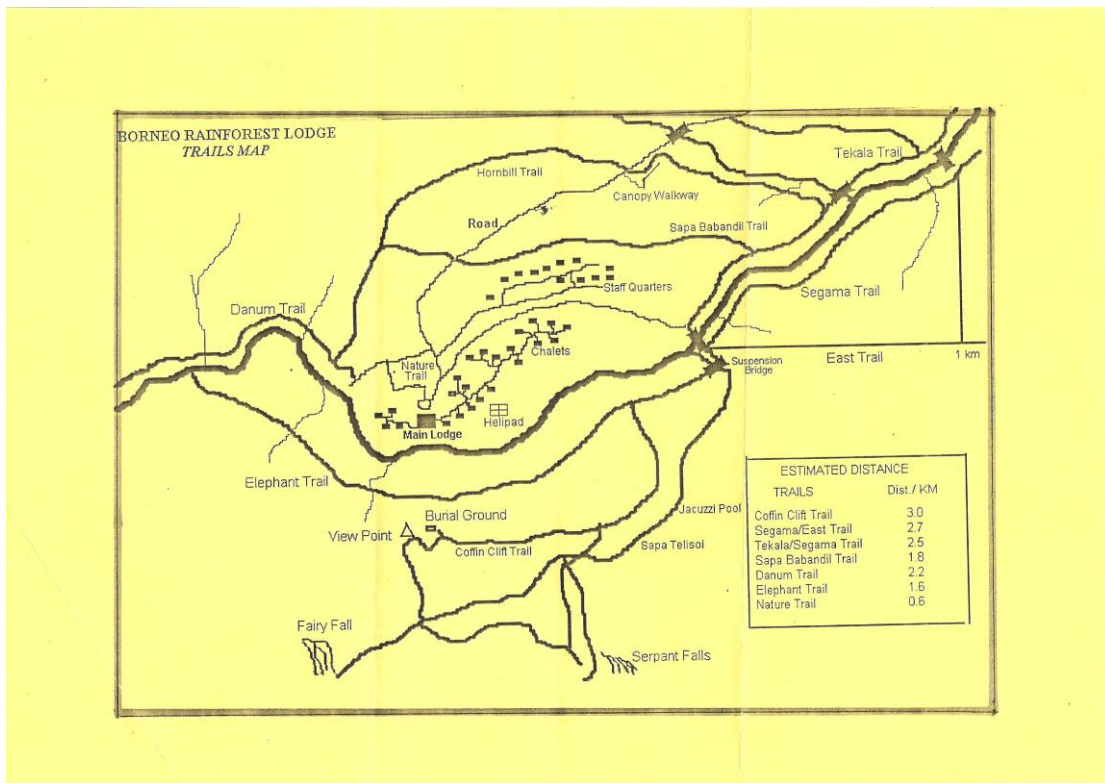
Generally speaking the first part of drive along the approach road is quiet, we only saw Greater Mouse Deer (common around the lodge), Red Giant Flying Squirrel, Brown Spiny Rat & Common Palm Civet & a brief Leopard Cat along this road. The best spotlighting is along the main road at the end of the approach road & we saw a good variety of species including 10 Leopard Cats, Malay Civets, Small-toothed Palm Civets, Common Palm Civets & 'Borneo Pygmy' Elephant along here. See checklist for more details. The drives were not as productive as the 2003 drives but were still reasonably good. Previous experience suggested that the best spotlighting is after heavy afternoon/early evening rain when a lot of mammals come out on the roads to avoid the wet vegetation. Jon Hall found the same thing in 2004. On this trip this did not seem to be the case probably because the cloud lingered right through the night & we found that the sections of the road shrouded in low cloud were totally unproductive. The sections without low cloud produced mammals on the roads.

It may also be that it is more productive later in the year (May-August) when there are more fruiting trees improving your chances of seeing Slow Loris, Bintaurong etc.

Banded Palm Civets sometimes feed behind the restaurant at night.

During the day the trails are excellent for up to 6 species of primate, Orang Utan, Red Leaf Monkey, Bornean Gibbon & Pig-tailed & Long-tailed Macaques are regularly seen with Hose's Leaf Monkey being seen occasionally. Smooth & Oriental Small-clawed Otters are both regularly seen along the river, we saw a group of 9 Smooth Otters one afternoon.

Finally the birding is excellent & we saw both Black-headed & Blue-headed Pittas along with Great-billed Heron & a number of other quality species.



Kinabatangan River

Historically most people have stayed at one of the lodges at Sukau. Unfortunately however with the area now containing 10 lodges the area is overrun with people & it is apparently not uncommon for there to be up to 30 boats on the main tributary during the late afternoon when primate watching is at its best. As a consequence of this the increased level of disturbance has had a negative impact on primate numbers in the area.

Fortunately there are now three lodges about 40 minutes from Sukau & these enable you to avoid the crowds. The best of these is Kinabatangan Jungle Camp run by Robert Chong. We stayed there for three nights which cost c.£210 per person including transfers, meals, accommodation, 3 boat trips (including night cruises) per day & guiding by Robert. The rooms are comfortable & being a small lodge they are happy to cater to people's individual tastes.

For most people primates & particularly Proboscis Monkeys are the main reason for visiting the river & these are common along the main river & along a tributary about 20 minutes from the lodge. Late afternoon is best for primates & Proboscis Monkey & Long-tailed Macaques are common. We also saw small numbers of Silvered Langur & Hose's Leaf Monkey also occurs. Orang Utans are common & we saw 6 along a small stretch of the main river within 20 minutes on the third afternoon. We also had one in the camp itself on the first evening.

The camp has a couple of trails where you can see primates & squirrels including Prevost's, Plantain & Plain Pygmy. Common & Banded Palm Civets are occasionally seen around the lodge at night & Clouded Leopard has been seen from the lodge during the day on two occasions!

Three species of otter occur along the river but are generally elusive.

The night cruises can be good with Flat-headed Cat being regularly seen, we had excellent views on two consecutive nights, & also saw Leopard Cat, Small-toothed Palm Civet, Malay Civet & Slow Loris.

KJC can be highly recommended. For bookings contact Robert at labukbb@yahoo.com

Itinerary

- 13th
 - Arrived Kota Kinabalu late morning. Transferred to Hyatt Regency.
 - Afternoon at Kota Kinabalu Wetland Sanctuary & Likas Bay
- 14th
 - Early morning flight to Lahud Datu. Transfer to Tabin, late morning around lodge.
 - Later afternoon at Mud Volcano observation tower.
 - Evening night drive along approach road.
- 15th
 - Early morning drive along approach road followed by walk along Sambar Trail
 - Later afternoon drive/walk to Mud Volcano where overnighted in Observation Tower.
- 16th
 - Early morning along road back to lodge
 - Later afternoon walk & evening night drive along approach road.
- 17th
 - Morning transfer to Borneo Rainforest Lodge
 - Afternoon walk along Segama & Tekala Trails & back along approach road
 - Extended night drive from 2015-0100
- 18th
 - Early morning (0615) walk to Canopy Walkway & back to lodge
 - Morning walk along boardwalk, Hornbill Trail, Canopy Walkway Trail & back to lodge along Segama River.
 - Afternoon walk along approach road.
 - Extended night drive from 2010-0020

- 19th
 - Early morning (0530) walk along approach road, Canopy Walkway Trail & along Segama River to lodge.
 - Morning walk along East Trail & Segama Trails before returning to lodge.
 - Late afternoon along Danum Trail & viewpoint.
 - Extended night drive from 2015-0015.
- 20th
 - Early morning (0430 i.e. pre-dawn) walk c.2.5 km along approach road & back to lodge.
 - Morning walk to end of Danum Trail
 - Afternoon drive to top of approach road & walk back to lodge via viewpoint.
 - Spotlighting along boardwalk followed by extended night drive from 2100-0100.
- 21st
 - Early morning walk (0515) along approach road, Tekala & Segama Trails & back to lodge
 - Morning walk along Segama & Tekala Trails & back along approach road
 - Afternoon walk along approach road to Tekala Trail & back along road to lodge
 - Extended night drive from 0810 to 0040 followed by walk along boardwalk & Hornbill Trail until 0145.
- 22nd
 - Transfer back to Lahad Datu & on to Kinabatangan River arriving mid-afternoon
 - Late afternoon cruise along Kinabatangan River & tributary
 - Night cruise along Kinabatangan River & tributary
- 23rd
 - Morning, afternoon & night cruises along Kinabatangan River & tributary
 - Late morning walk around trails at KJC.
- 24th
 - Morning, afternoon & night cruises along Kinabatangan River & tributary
 - Late morning walk around trails at KJC.
 - Short spotlighting walk along trails at KJC.
- 25th
 - Early morning cruise to Sukau
 - Return to camp & transfer to Sandakan for return flights

Checklist

All records are RW's unless otherwise stated.

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| Lesser/Slender Treeshrew <i>Tupaia minor/gracilis</i> | Singles Tabin (Sambar Trail) & Kinabatangan Jungle Camp |
| Large Treeshrew <i>Tupaia tana</i> | Singles Tabin (Sambar Trail) & Borneo Rainforest Lodge (Boardwalk) |
| Colugo <i>Cynocephalus variegatus</i> | Borneo Rainforest Lodge <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Red morph at daytime roost on day 1 along Tekala Trail. • Grey morph on 4th night drive • Grey morph at daytime roost near lodge on final morning |
| Slow Loris <i>Nycticebus coucang</i> | One on 3 rd night cruise along Kinabatangan River. |
| Red Leaf Monkey <i>Presbytis rubicunda</i> | Seen on 4 days at Borneo Rainforest Lodge. At least 4 possibly 5 groups of up to 8 animals, 2 groups containing pale morphs. |
| Silvered Langur <i>Presbytis cristata</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Six including one orange morph on 1st afternoon along Kinabatangan River. • Two along tributary on 3rd afternoon. |
| Proboscis Monkey <i>Naalis larvatus</i> | Common along Kinabatangan River & tributary particularly on afternoon cruises. |
| Long-tailed Macaque <i>Macaca fascicularis</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seen along Segama Trail at Borneo Rainforest Lodge on 2 days. • Common along Kinabatangan River & tributary. |
| Pig-tailed Macaque <i>Macaca nemestrina</i> | Up to 20 seen on three days at Tabin & two days at Borneo Rainforest Lodge. |

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| Orang Utan <i>Pongo pygmaeus</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tabin - an adult male plus a juvenile near the observation tower on the 3rd morning • Borneo Rainforest Lodge - a single male near the lodge on the 1st 3 days • Kinabatangan River <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Two along the river & one at the camp on the 1st afternoon 2. Two along the river on the 2nd afternoon 3. A female with a young one on the 2nd morning 4. The female with the young one, the two from the previous afternoon, and another singleton on the 3rd afternoon all within 15 minutes. |
| Bornean Gibbon <i>Hylobates muelleri</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tabin - three groups seen on the 2nd morning, two along the approach road & one along Sambar Trail. • Borneo Rainforest Lodge - heard daily, seen by PT near the viewpoint on day 4 • Kinabatangan River - heard |
| Prevost's Squirrel <i>Callosciurus prevostii</i> | A total of five at Borneo Rainforest Lodge & one at Kinabatangan Jungle Camp |
| Plantain Squirrel <i>Callosciurus notatus</i> | Two singles Kinabatangan Jungle Camp |
| Low's Squirrel <i>Sundasciurus lowi</i> | One Tabin (PT) |
| Plain Pygmy Squirrel <i>Exilisciurus exilis</i> | Two Tabin, four Borneo Rainforest Lodge & one Kinabatangan Jungle Camp |
| Black Flying Squirrel <i>Aeromys tehromelas</i> | Borneo Rainforest Lodge – one on 1 st night-drive, two on 4 th & one on 5 th . |
| Thomas's Flying Squirrel <i>Aeromys thomasi</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tabin – one near observation tower • Borneo Rainforest Lodge – two on 3rd night drive |
| Red Giant Flying Squirrel <i>Petaurista petaurista</i> | Borneo Rainforest Lodge – nightly counts of 5, 2, 3+, 1 & 3 |
| Flying Squirrel sp | Borneo Rainforest Lodge – 2 on 1 st night drive & 3+ on 3 rd . |
| Brown Spiny Rat <i>Maxomys rajah</i> | Borneo Rainforest Lodge – singles on 3 rd & 5 th night drives |
| Malayan Porcupine <i>Hystrix brachyura</i> | Tabin – one on 1 st night drive |
| Sun Bear <i>Helarctos malayanus</i> | Fresh droppings along road to Mud Volcano trail |
| Malay Civet <i>Viverra zangalunga</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tabin - one on 1st night drive • Borneo Rainforest Lodge - nightly counts of 1, 4, 1, 1 & 7 & one along boardwalk • Kinabatangan River - one along tributary on 3rd night cruise |
| Small-tooted Palm Civet <i>Arctogalidia trivirgata</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Borneo Rainforest Lodge –singles on 2nd & 3rd night drives. • Kinabatangan River – singles on 2nd & 3rd night cruises. |
| Common Palm Civet <i>Paradoxorus hermaphroditus</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tabin – 5 & 2 on the two night drives • Borneo Rainforest Lodge – nightly counts of 2, 2, 1, 2 & 1 • Kinabatangan River – one in jungle camp on 1st night |
| Banded Palm Civet <i>Hermigalus derbyanus</i> | Kinabatangan River – one along tributary on 3 rd night cruise |
| Flat-headed Cat <i>Prionailurus planiceps</i> | Kinabatangan River – great views of a single hunting along the tributary on the 2 nd & 3 rd night cruises. |
| Leopard Cat <i>Felis bengalensis</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tabin – one & 3+ on the two night drives • Borneo Rainforest Lodge – nightly counts of 4, 0, 2, 3 & 1 • Kinabatangan River – one seen twice on the 2nd night cruise |

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| Smooth Otter <i>Lutra perspicillata</i> | Borneo Rainforest Lodge – a group of 9 viewable from the chalet & lodge on the 4 th afternoon |
| 'Borneo Pygmy' Elephant <i>Elaphas maximus</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Borneo Rainforest Lodge – 5+ on the 2nd night drive • Fresh droppings at Tabin & Kinabatangan River |
| Bearded Pig <i>Sus barbatus</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tabin – very common, daily counts of 1, 36 (including a group of 19) & 22. • Borneo Rainforest Lodge – singles on 3 days • Kinabatangan River – four on 2nd morning, one on 3rd morning |
| Greater Mouse Deer <i>Tragulus napu</i> | Borneo Rainforest Lodge – nightly counts of 1, 0, 3, 2 & 4 |
| Lesser Mouse Deer <i>Tragulus meminna</i> | Singles Tabin & Borneo Rainforest Lodge |
| Red Muntjac <i>Muntiacus muntjac</i> | One Borneo Rainforest Lodge |
| Sambar <i>Cervus unicolor</i> | Tabin – two at Mud Volcano Borneo Rainforest Lodge – daily/nightly counts of 2, 3, 0, 5 & 2 |