

THE CATS OF THE KINABATANGAN RIVER

- In Search of Flat-headed Cat and Clouded Leopard



The daily scene at Kinabatangan Jungle Camp: Bearded Pigs and Water Monitors.

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1 Introduction

I visited the Kinabatangan River in Sabah in 2008 hoping to see Flat-headed Cat but on that occasion the river was extremely high and it was impossible to see into the thick riverine vegetation. The cats are well known for hunting nocturnally along the shoreline here but if the shoreline is thirty metres into the forest then your chances of spotting a patrolling cat are virtually zero! Needless to say I failed. I had also been hoping to see Clouded Leopard - obviously a tall order, but possible nevertheless. In fact, one was seen the night after I left. That scarcely made me feel any better about my ill fortune.

Therefore, with a trip to Sumatra already planned, (the subject of another trip report), I resolved to return to the Kinabatangan to try again. Sabah is not exactly next door to Sumatra but at least doing the two together cuts out one long haul flight. I decided to give myself four nights, long enough I reckoned if river conditions were in my favour. And, if they weren't, it probably wouldn't make much difference if I had a month.

2 Logistics

I stayed at the Kinabatangan Jungle Camp which is run by Robert Chong. I was pleased to find that Robert understood exactly what was required to see cats. I was allocated my own boat and a dedicated guide and boatman. The camp runs short "sundowner cruises" for more casual visitors and for birders but to see cats you really need your own boat and team and enough time out on the river each night to cover the best areas.

The team were excellent. The guide, Lim, was knowledgeable and experienced and the boatman, Rudi, was extremely skilled at guiding the boat quietly into position when eye-shine was found. He knew just when to cut the throttle on the engine and use the paddles to edge us close. This, as I am well aware, is no easy task in the dark and when the current is inexorably drawing you downstream, but Rudi was a true craftsman and was instrumental in our success.

The camp itself was very good. The accommodation was clean and comfortable and the food simply outstanding. Quite a few visitors come here just to relax in pleasant surroundings. The bar and dining area sits high up on a raised platform, giving a grandstand view of the forest floor below. And, since the kitchen staff have always deliberately thrown out food waste here, there is a continuous procession of wildlife visiting the camp. Bearded Pigs come and go throughout the day, as do at least half a dozen Water Monitors and two resident Storm's Storks. Prevost's Squirrels are never far away and one morning I found a Plain Pygmy Squirrel. It all added to the entertainment!

The camp is best reached via Sandakan, (Malaysian Airlines flight from Kuala Lumpur), where Robert can arrange a transfer by road.

3 Day-by-Day Log

Sunday 22nd June

The two hour transfer from Sandakan to the Jungle Camp was uneventful. Earlier in the year there had been some violent incidents in the region with a kidnapping near Sandakan and a gun battle between terrorists and Police at nearby Lahud Datu. As a consequence the FCO were warning against all but essential travel in this part of Sabah, but I found absolutely nothing to be worried about. Sandakan was quiet and relaxed. It appeared that these had been isolated incidents and that the threat to tourists was, by now at least, minimal or even non-existent. And, of course, even European cities are no strangers to occasional terrorist attacks. On balance, Sandakan looked safer than, say, Paris or London.

I arrived at KJC in the late afternoon completely exhausted but nothing was going to stop me getting out onto the river that evening. After a brief rest and dinner, we were out on the Kinabatangan, heading downstream to one of its main tributaries, the Tenebang River.

The Tenebang has a big reputation for Flat-headed Cats, offering the perfect habitat of a flat, open shoreline backing onto tall, thick forest. The Cats have plenty of cover to rest up during the day and ideal stretches of shoreline along which to hunt for fish, amphibians and small birds. The cats are seen at various places along the main river too but it is here, in this quiet tributary, that the majority of sightings seem to be made. Incidentally, it was at this point that I realised that I had, up till then, been quite oblivious to a potentially very important factor - namely that the Kinabatangan is tidal! As it turned out, I was lucky, our evening spotlighting sessions more or less co-inciding with low tide. Had the opposite been the case I probably wouldn't have seen any cats. Future visitors should check local tide tables very carefully when planning the timing of a visit!

Our first evening passed very quietly. We found a few Estuarine Crocodiles and a Buffy Fish Owl - and an unidentified rodent, (possibly Malaysian Field Rat), swimming across the Tenebang. But, as far as cats were concerned, our first night was a blank.

Monday 23rd June

We were up before dawn, bleary-eyed and groggy, to go back out on the river. Lim had occasionally seen Clouded Leopard asleep on branches very early in the morning and so our plan was to search likely looking spots along the edge of the forest as we worked our way along the river.

We headed upstream, still needing our torches for the first hour, moving very slowly and carefully examining each area of tall trees where the canopy inter-locked and where a Leopard might be lurking. But no Clouded Leopard were at home. We did find a Common Palm Civet sitting on a branch overhanging the water and there were plenty of Long-tailed Macaques and Proboscis Monkeys. By nine o'clock it was hot and humid and it had become

evident that our search was fruitless. So we gave up and headed back to camp for a late breakfast. Here there were Prevost's Squirrels cheekily running along the hand rails of our dining platform, hoping for kitchen scraps. (They were duly obliged!). And below were half a dozen Water Monitors, a few Bearded Pigs and a Storm's Stork.



Prevost's Squirrel: note the absence of a white lateral band in this sub-species.

After a siesta I went to explore a two kilometre trail that forms a circular loop around the camp. Being hot and dry, there were fewer leeches than I expected and my brave decision not wear leech socks was vindicated. (They *are* fairly effective but I find them excruciatingly uncomfortable when it is hot). There were some spectacular butterflies and a few common birds but no sign of mammal activity, (hardly surprising in the heat of midday). But I did find some good places to put my camera traps.

It was still hot when we ventured out on to the river after dinner, though the movement of the boat brought instant relief as the cool draught of air blew in our faces. We went upstream this time, giving the Tenebang a rest.

We had been spot-lighting for about two hours and I was starting to doubt our chances when, suddenly, there was bright eye-shine about eighty metres ahead on our left. Two small yellow-white pinpricks of lights blazed back at us from the edge of a broad mudbank, giving us that fixed, defiant stare that is so characteristic of cats. Surely a Flat-headed Cat?

Rudi swung the boat further out into the river in an attempt to approach it obliquely from slightly upstream. But then, just as we were almost close enough to clinch the identification, it fled. We inched our way quietly towards the mudbank hoping it might not have gone far but I knew we'd lost it. Agony!

There were no more chances that evening and I was grinding my teeth with frustration as we later made the return journey back to camp.

Tuesday 24th June

Lim and Rudi were relieved (I suspect!) to hear that I wasn't up for another pre-dawn search for sleeping Clouded Leopards. Instead, I got up at a civilised time and went for a stroll around the walking trail.



Spectacular, though unidentified, butterfly on the walking trail.

The Long-tailed Macaques were around, as usual, and a I was surprised to see a Buffy Fish Owl out and about in broad daylight. Then, I heard a slight movement in the trees ahead. I stopped for a moment, not sure what to expect. A moment later a large grey primate appeared and the unmistakable form of a Bornean Gibbon swung across the trail only forty metres in front of me. It paused to glance at me and then barrelled off through the trees, swinging casually from hand to hand.

Ten minutes later I was stopped in my tracks by some weird grunting coming, it seemed, from deep within the forest to my left. I presumed it was Bearded Pigs and retreated behind

a big tree to see if they might materialise. But, though the grunting continued for some while, nothing seemed to be coming my way. In fact the noise appeared to be coming all the while from the same spot, though which spot that was exactly was increasingly unclear. The acoustics within the forest can be very misleading and I began looking around for some clue as to what was going on. Then I spotted it. High above me in the fork of some branches was an Orang-utan. It grunted and, in an instant, the mystery was solved. It was a female and she had a tiny young Orang-utan clinging to her. I had obviously been the subject of her attention for quite a while and she stared down at me with what seemed a mixture of interest and suspicion. I stared back and, from her body language, I could see she had realised that I'd seen her. She retreated to a slightly higher branch and so, having had a good enough view already, I left them to go about their business.



Storm's Stork: one of a resident pair at the camp.

The afternoon was extremely hot and I was content to spend it in the air-conditioned comfort of my room. It was also achingly humid and I could sense that a big storm was building up. It arrived at dusk and the initial pitter-patter of heavy individual raindrops soon gave way to a deluge. I began to fear for that evening's river session, though I knew that tropical storms were often violent but short-lived. Better than later, I hoped.

So it proved. Immediately after dinner the rain stopped and fragments of clear sky appeared between the great banks of cloud. Distant rumbles of thunder could still be heard and every now and then savage forks of lightning sizzled Earthwards in stabbing three or four fingered thrusts. It seemed there was every prospect of another storm and so I thought it wise to

leave everything of value (or which could be damaged by rain) behind. That included my camera, a most unfortunate decision as it turned out.

But at least we were off, even if a rapid retreat might subsequently be forced upon us. The night was still and warm though much less humid than before the storm. It seemed to be low tide and, provided the storm held off, it looked like the prospects for cats were good. A Malay Civet had been mooching around the dining area as we were leaving, doubtless on the lookout for scraps, and I took that to be a good omen.

We headed downstream towards the Tenebang though, on reaching its junction with the Kinabatangan, we continued on downstream, a little to my surprise. Then, shortly afterwards, we turned off to our left into a tiny creek where steep banks rose up on each side. This, in turn, led us into a quiet ox-bow lake, a place I dimly recognised from my earlier visit in 2008. The low tide had left wide expanses of muddy bank exposed in front of deep forest, perfect for our Flat-headed Cat it seemed. And within minutes we found eye-shine. The animal, which we presumed to be a Flat-headed Cat, had been right out in the open on the water's edge. But, as on the previous night, it was gone in an instant. More frustration! And, to compound matters, we soon after had yet more bright yellow eye-shine which we couldn't make anything of, this time quite distant. That made three chances, none of which we had been able to approach successfully. I was beginning to tear my hair out.

I needn't have worried. We re-traced our route back to the confluence of the Kinabatangan and Tenebang and slowly began working our way along. We struck gold almost immediately, Rudi picking up eye-shine on the left hand bank on the water's edge. This time fortune was on our side and the animal sat perfectly still watching our gradual noiseless approach. At twenty metres I had a glorious view. The head was strongly marked with orange-brown streaks, the back and flanks were plain tawny-brown, the legs were marked with black stripes and the short tail was a smoky grey. This was the Flat-headed Cat I'd been searching for. It sat, quite motionless, staring at us. We edged closer, Rudi expertly paddling us into an ever better position. Surely it would spook? We got to ten metres at which point I scarcely needed binoculars any more. Then, incredibly, with our boat nudging the shore, we came to rest at just five metres distance. It would have made a fantastic photo but my camera was warm and dry back in my room. I muttered something very unchristian under my breath. We sat watching each other for an eternity before, eventually, it got up, stretched itself, yawned and sauntered off. Even then we were able to glimpse it moving casually along the shoreline for quite a long way.

It was time to move on and Rudi swung the boat round and re-started the engine. But hardly had it spluttered back into life before we had yet more eye-shine on the opposite bank. It couldn't be another cat, could it? But it was. Rudi cut the engine and paddled us gently towards it. Once more the cat just sat there, apparently transfixed. In the end we got so close that I couldn't focus my binoculars on it anymore and according to Swarovski, whose judgement is worth something, that must have meant that I was barely three metres

away from the animal. It felt like I could have reached out to touch it. Two sightings in two minutes, both so close that I could see every hair and every whisker. The gut-wrenching agony of the three previous near-misses evaporated. I could ask for no more.

In fact we went on to find eye-shine on two more occasions, neither of which were conclusive. But I didn't care; our mission had already been well and truly accomplished.

Wednesday 25th June

Over breakfast the usual suspects were on view searching for scraps. A fight broke out between two evenly matched Water Monitors and there was a lot of aggressive posturing and snapping of jaws before eventually one of them gave way. The Bearded Pigs just carried on hoovering up the kitchen waste as greedily and efficiently as ever. However, on scanning the nearby trees, I found that there was a newcomer: a Plain Pygmy Squirrel clinging to a bare trunk in full view.

Another stroll along the trail produced a single Plantain Squirrel and a couple of Prevost's Squirrels but nothing else of note. I took the opportunity, while I was there, to re-position one of my two camera traps in the very faint hope of capturing something exotic on video.

The day proved to be an anti-climax after the excitement of the previous evening. There was another sharp storm later in the afternoon, which again threatened to terminate the evening's spot-lighting. But, once more, it blew itself out just in time to let us go ahead as planned. I was determined to take my camera this time, whatever the weather threatened, but it did me no good. We had brief eye-shine on the right bank of the Kinabatangan as we headed downstream to the Tenebang but it ran off before we could get a proper look. It was almost certainly another Flat-headed Cat. The Tenebang was deathly quiet and, though we carefully spot-lighted our way for miles, nothing appeared except for innumerable Black-crowned Night Herons and Buffy Fish Owls. We had had all our luck the previous night and I was hardly in a position to complain.

Thursday 26th June

This was my last morning and one job remained to be done - to collect my two camera traps on the walking trail. In the hope of catching a nocturnal animal on the trail I was up well before dawn and picking my way along by torchlight. As it turned out, both traps were blank but I thought I might as well do the whole two kilometres. At least it would give me an appetite for breakfast and, after all, you never knew what might cross your path!

I was about half way round when I suddenly heard heavy movements in the undergrowth ahead. I stopped, intrigued with what it might be. Probably Bearded Pigs I guessed. It was just starting to get light but still far too dim to see much. So I switched the torch to full beam and pointed it directly along the trail ahead. What I saw made my hair stand on end! There, in the middle of the trail, some one hundred metres away, were two Asian Elephants. The

slightly nearer of two, who now had my torch beam shining straight into its face, raised its trunk and trumpeted with annoyance. There was further crashing in the undergrowth as others made to join them. It was obvious that by now I had their full attention.

I had no idea whether this Bornean race of Asian Elephant was particularly aggressive but I decided that it was time to withdraw. In areas where it is persecuted by local villagers, (such as Sri Lanka), the Asian Elephant can be extremely dangerous. It didn't look much like these characters would charge - but, equally, it seemed unwise to press the issue further. So I abandoned any idea of completing the trail walk and began quietly retreating. The elephants soon calmed down and I left them in peace to carry on feeding.

Later, as I made the short boat journey from the camp to the village upstream where the road transfer started, I encountered the Elephants again, this time cooling off in the river. From the safety of the boat they looked a lot less intimidating!

Then, the long and boring journey by road and air to Jakarta began, the prelude to ten days in Sumatra looking for Marbled Cat, (amongst other targets), and the subject of another trip report. The Asian "Cat-fest" of 2014 had got off to a very good start!

4 List of Mammals Recorded

Species	Latin Name	Notes
Flat-headed Cat	<i>Prionailurus planiceps</i>	Two superb close range sightings on Tenebang River.
Malay Civet	<i>Viverra zibetha</i>	One sighting at the camp.
Common Palm Civet	<i>Paradoxurus hermaphroditus</i>	One sighting along Kinabatangan River.
Proboscis Monkey	<i>Nasalis larvatus</i>	Common along Kinabatangan River.
Long-tailed Macaque	<i>Macaca fascicularis</i>	Common everywhere.
Bornean Gibbon	<i>Hylobates muelleri</i>	Single sighting along walking trail.
Orang-utan	<i>Pongo pygmaeus</i>	Single sighting along walking trail.
Prevost's Squirrel	<i>Callosciurus prevostii</i>	Ever-present at camp when food available.
Plantain Squirrel	<i>Callosciurus notatus</i>	Single sighting on walking trail.
Plain Pygmy Squirrel	<i>Exilisciurus exilis</i>	Single sighting at camp.
Bornean Elephant	<i>Elephas maximus borneaensis</i>	Twice: walking trail and in Kinabatangan River.
Bearded Pig	<i>Sus barbatus</i>	Ever-present around the camp.
Total Species Recorded		12