

Trip Report: Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia, August 2024

I was sent to attend a conference in Kuching in August 2024. It was a 5-day conference, and my work was covering me for 3 of those days. On the remaining 2, I had their permission to either attend the conference, or, in my boss' own words, "goof off". It was an interesting conference, but as I would be leaving right after it ended, I jumped at the chance to go mammalwatching. My wife and daughter were not with me, but my father and sister were. Hence, I coerced the latter two into joining me on my field trips.

Kubah National Park:

One of the nights I was there, I took a tour to go explore Kubah National Park at night. Botanically, this park is famous for its palms, and zoologically, its draw card are its frogs. Over 60 species of frogs can be found in this park. Whilst I was mainly focussed on herpetofauna, I did see some *Cynopterus* short-nosed fruit bats flying around and calling (likely emerging from roosts) near the visitor centre. Based on nearby iNaturalist records, these were probably Lesser Short-nosed Fruit Bats, but it was not possible to positively identify the ones I saw to species level based on the views I had.

I did see some mystery eyeshine very high in the canopy. No idea what it could have been. The guide reckoned it was likely some species of civet. Another possibility is that it was a Bornean Slow Loris. Some of my friends at the conference managed to track one down at a secret location in the park that the locals would only tell you about if you spoke Bahasa Malaysia. Sadly, I do not, and was not with my friends who do when they found one.

Bako National Park:

The other park I explored, on one of my days off, was Bako National Park. This is a neat coastal park that features quite a few vegetation types in a rather small area, including rainforest, mangroves, and keranga. The wildlife has long been protected here, unlike elsewhere in Sarawak, which makes them much easier to see because they do not flee immediately after detecting humans. Mammals elsewhere in Sarawak are notoriously shy due to historical and current hunting pressure.

My main target in Bako National Park was the Proboscis Monkey, and this park is one of the easier and more accessible places to find the species. To this end, I hired a guide from Borneo Eco Tours, and he took myself, my slightly disgruntled father and my very disgruntled little sister together with a few other tourists through the park. Katy Hall, be warned for the future: it is quite possible to be dragged along as a reluctant mammalwatcher by one's offspring, not just one's parents...

In all fairness to my father and sister, they are actually reasonably good sports, and I had taken care to select this particular tour as under the description of physical difficulty, the tour was labelled “soft”. What could possibly go wrong?

The start of the tour was easy enough. It’s not possible to drive into Bako National Park - instead, one has to go to the wharf at Kampung Bako and take a rather scenic motorboat ride in. Upon arriving at the arrival beach, it is a short, 100m walk up the trail to the visitor centre.

As soon as we disembarked on the beach, we saw **Bornean Bearded Pigs** foraging where the vegetation met the sand (photo below). We also had somewhat distant views of **Silvered Leaf Monkeys** foraging in some trees down the beach. The guide took us to the visitor centre, where we washed the sand from our feet and put our shoes back on. Whilst we were waiting for him to log out planned route with the park staff, we got better and closer looks at some Bornean Bearded Pigs foraging in the grass and soil on the visitor centre grounds. In some trees near (50-100m from) the visitor centre, we had close looks at a female **Long-tailed Macaque**, as well closer looks at troop of Silvered Leaf Monkeys (photo below). The latter included a bright orange baby being carried by one of the females.





Once our guide had completed the paperwork, we set off through the park. Almost immediately after we left the visitor centre, we stopped seeing wild mammals other than Long-tailed Macaque for quite some time. No matter, I thought, we were still being shown some cool reptiles (Bornean Keeled Pit Viper) and it was nice walking through the forest and then the mangroves. We ran into more Long-tailed Macaques in the mangroves as well. None of it was particularly taxing.

This came to an abrupt end when we reached some cliff-side jungle, and our guide announced we would be ascending it to view the keranga at the top. A keranga seemed to me to be an especially hot, exposed, rocky part of the jungle that is nutrient-poor and therefore is home to a higher proportion of carnivorous plants like pitcher plants. It does not, to my knowledge, act as particularly important habitat for any mammal, and is not pleasant to be in.

It was, however, just as much about the journey as the destination. I suppose it *could* be described as “soft”, if by that word one meant, “ascending 400 m in altitude in 20 minutes, up a killer staircase made of rocks and boulders, worn tree roots, and where lucky, very steep and slippery wooden steps (incline of 65-80 degrees)”. Those who have the slightest shred of respect for the English language might, at best, use the word “intense”. My father and sister would say “arduous” or “exhausting” was more appropriate.

Once we got to the top and got a look at the pitcher plants, we recovered as best as we could in the intense heat and sun. Afterwards was our descent, which was not as tiring as the way up, but certainly hairier, as well as harder on the joints.

The guide took us through the rainforest along the coast for 1-2 more km of undulating terrain before we stopped at a beach to rest for about an hour. It was sorely needed. By this point in the day, we were very tired, and the heat of the midday sun was beating down.

Proboscis Monkeys are generally seen in the park early in the morning or late in the afternoon when conditions are cooler. As the guide began to take us back to the visitor centre, I was resigned to “dipping” on this species, but I was almost too tired to care. However, I did mentally ask St Francis of Assisi (patron saint of animals and ecologists) for help - this has been a turning point in some of my mammalwatching trips before...

As we stumbled through the rainforest, feet dragging through the litter, the guide seemed to take pity on us. He announced that, since it was low tide, it would be fine if we walked back to the easy part of the trail using the sandy beach below the mangroves on the coast. So, we descended further downhill from the rainforest into the mangroves fringing the coast.

Upon entering the mangroves, we heard a grunting, bellowing sound repeatedly boom over the canopy. My father grew up in Kuching, and had visited the park multiple times in his childhood, so he immediately recognised it as the call of a male Proboscis Monkey, and so did the guide. Our tour group immediately froze, desperately scanning the canopy uphill where the calls had come from for just a glimpse of the monkey...

As it turns out, we needn't have bothered. The enormous male decided to burst out of the rainforest canopy, swing and jump his way down into the mangrove canopy, and sit above us no more than 4 m over our heads. In fact, at one point, as he was crossing into the mangrove canopy, he would have been only 3 m above us, on a branch that took him directly over our heads, and we actually moved a bit further away so as to not risk being in his “line of fire” if he decided to relieve himself.

Needless to say, we had amazing views of him. He sat pretty for us in the tree for about 10-15 minutes, bellowing and calling. The sky behind him made it hard to get good shots. An example is below (photo below):



Eventually, he swung through the mangrove forest and disappeared from view by dropping down onto a part of the beach hidden from our view by the mangrove trees.

I was ecstatic. Even my little sister was impressed - she would later say the sighting was not worth the physical effort it took to get, but she enjoyed it once it happened. My father felt the same.

On the walk back to the visitor centre, we glimpsed another pair of Long-tailed Macaques eating, of all things, horseshoe crabs (photo below):

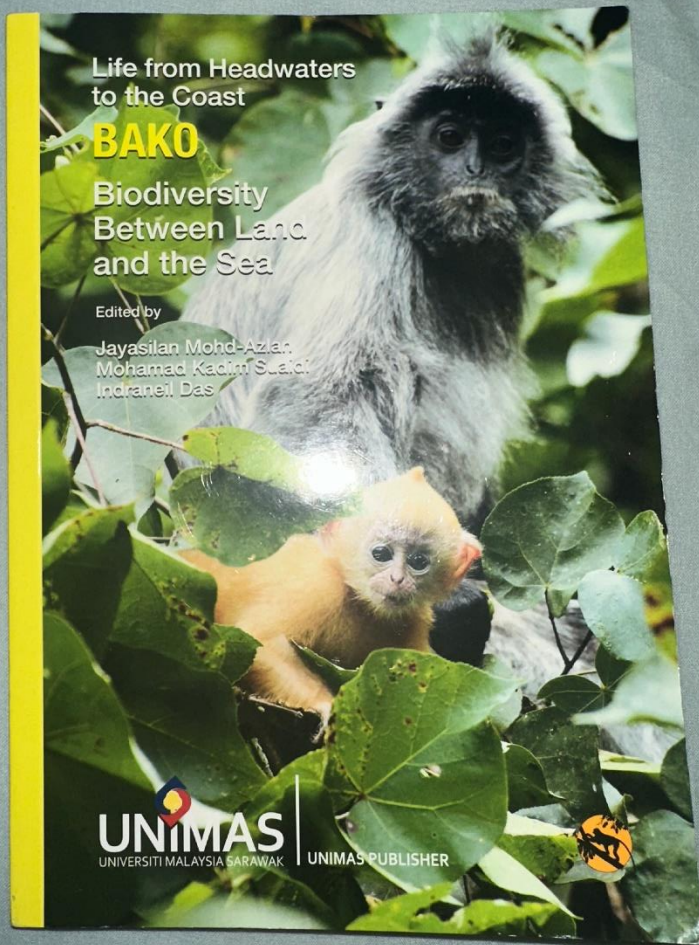


We could not reasonably expect to see much more, and certainly not more mammal species. However, I was pleasantly surprised to find that the trip was unreasonable in this regard - right before we reached the visitor centre, a pair of other park-goers pointed out a bright orange Sunda Colugo sitting just above head height on a tree right by the trail (see photo below). I could have reached out and touched it. Perhaps St Francis was able to get that thrown in for me too. If so, he still was not done - after we ate lunch and boated back to the wharf, a Plantain Squirrel crossed the road in front of us just as the guide began to drive us back to Kuching.



Stuff I missed:

It is possible to stay in guest houses at Bako National Park at night, and night walks can be arranged for guests who stay there overnight. There would presumably be some chance for encountering more mammal species of the park by doing this, although judging by the iNaturalist records, only the mammal species we had already observed are seen with any kind of reliability. Official records of other species were largely derived from scientific motion camera studies (for medium-large species) or trapping studies (for bats and smaller species) of the park. According to a book on the park (photo below) published by UNIMAS (Universiti Malaysia Sarawak), Lesser Mousedeer was one of the most commonly detected species on cameras, so perhaps this species might be findable on night walks.



There is an Orangutan rehabilitation centre near Kuching called Semenggoh Wildlife Centre (they look after other species as well). I elected not to go, as I had limited time available, and those orangutans would not count as wild (to me anyway).

There was also another wildlife rescue and rehabilitation centre called Matang Wildlife Centre. They also take visitors, and it could be a nice way to see some of the more elusive species in the region, but of course they would not count as wild individuals. No good for the list!

There are four cruises that go down Santubong River to the coastal waters around Santubong National Park, that look for Irrawaddy Dolphins during the day or Saltwater Crocodiles at night. Otters seem to be seen here sometimes as well. These tours did sound good, but I did not have any more days available to go during the day. At night I took pity on my family after the rigours of Bako National Park, electing not to put them through anything else.

Finally, Borneo Adventure runs a tour that goes looking for Western Tarsiers around Kuching (see their website), and they have a 70% success rate (without rain), with chances to run into other nocturnal mammals besides. I had originally intended to go and had even roped my little sister in as well but got spooked when they asked for our passport numbers during the booking. I was worried we would be exposing ourselves to identity theft or something along those lines as I could not understand why they would need such information. We later realised (once they were fully booked, of course) that they need the passport numbers of their guests so they can give them to the park staff - such ID is required for entering protected areas at night. Ah well - my little sister dodged that particular bullet, and I don't doubt I'll return to Kuching at some point. Ecotourism in the area seems well-supported, so I'm hopeful the tarsiers (and dolphins) will still be around the next time I visit.

Mammal List (lifers marked with *):

Bornean Bearded Pig *Sus barbatus**

Lesser Short-nosed Fruit Bat *Cynopterus brachyotis* (unconfirmed)

Sunda Colugo *Galeopterus variegatus*

Long-tailed Macaque *Macaca fascicularis*

Silvered Leaf Monkey *Trachypithecus cristatus* *

Proboscis Monkey *Nasalis larvatus* *

Plantain Squirrel *Callosciurus notatus*