

Javan Rhino tour 4th to 25th June 2011

Phil Telfer

This was a long-planned 3 week trip for myself and Steve Morgan arranged with WWF – Indonesia to try and see Javan Rhino in Ujung Kulon national park.

As far as it's known the entire world population of Javan Rhinos now exists only in Ujung Kulon on the Western tip of Java after the last animal in Vietnam was killed by poachers last year. There are only 47 animals left and the rangers are confident of this number from their extensive camera trap surveys. These are further divided into 3 sub-populations of 27, 15 and 5 animals so the situation for the species isn't looking great.

Before the rhino tour we spent a few nights on peninsular Malaysia in the hope of Malayan Tapir in Taman Negara and visited a couple of sites in Java, Gunung Gede and Halimun.

On arrival at Taman Negara we were told that the Tapirs that were regular last year had become more difficult but we spent 2 nights in Kumbang hide as this was still the best chance and a Tapir wandered across the clearing halfway through the 2nd night, a really smart animal. The only other mammals we saw here were the rats that shared the hide and our food with us. These we photographed and identified as Dark-tailed Niviventer. Around park headquarters were a few Grey-bellied squirrels and Long-tailed macaques and a spotlighting walk only found a Small-toothed palm civet. The well-known bat cave was closed due to a rock fall and our final nights spotlighting drive to the plantation was lost when our hire car decided not to work anymore. We had to abandon the car and had a rushed 4 hour taxi ride through the night to Kuala Lumpur for our early am flight to Jakarta. So apart from the Tapir we weren't exactly off to a flier on this trip.

Our first three days in Java were arranged with Indra of IF-Ecoadventure.com. We were met at Jakarta by our excellent driver Gawir and then spent several

hours in a Jakarta four lane traffic jam. We progressed nine kilometres in two and half hours and it then took another two and a half hours to reach Gede and a stop at Freddy's home stay. After picking at some of the lunch we were soon out for an afternoon and evening walk with our guide Eddy, who soon started to find us some interesting mammals. We saw Javan (Ebony) Langur, Black banded squirrel, Three striped ground squirrel, Horsfield's Treeshrew and Javan mongoose. Towards dusk we headed for the Mandlawani camp ground armed with biscuits and some cat food to try to tempt in a Ferret badger for which we'd been assured one night would be enough. Big mistake, no Ferret badger!

Next morning we were up before dawn for a walk up to the blue pool and on to the waterfall, getting brief views of Grizzled (Silvery) Langurs. We had a detour to a cave which had many Common Bentwing bats. It was very scenic but unfortunately rubbish was strewn everywhere and coming down the mountain we were passed by hundreds of noisy locals! After an early lunch we left for the really bumpy six hour drive to Gunung Halimum, arriving at the research station just before dusk. Here we waited for darkness, spotting a Red Giant flying squirrel and then a Javan Palm civet in a fruiting tree by the car park, which was soon followed by a Common Palm civet.



Javan Palm Civet



Common Palm Civet

Our two nights in Halimum were spent in the most basic of homestays, with really grim toilets adjoining the kitchen and amazingly we did survive the food here, just. We were out early the following morning for a walk in the beautiful forest with a local guide and during the morning we found Black Eared pygmy squirrel, Black Giant squirrel, Grizzled Langurs and finally the target Javan gibbons. This was a much nicer place than Gede and we were the only two people here. A quick check of our mammal traps and we had caught an Indomalayan Niviventer. While awaiting our nights spotlighting drive we learned that the Stink badger that was often seen in the road by the research station had been flattened by a truck the week before. We found him and he really did stink but several hours of driving didn't produce a live one.

Next day we had an eleven hour drive from Halimum over to Carita on the west coast where we were to meet up with the WWF team before our rhino adventure. This was a long boring day but just prior to reaching Carita we had glimpses of Krakatoa off shore and finally reached the Sunset View hotel just before dusk. Strangely even though the sea was right across the road and there

were some great sunsets you couldn't actually see them from the hotel. That evening we had dinner with Adhi and Andre from WWF and met some of our team for the trip ahead. The next morning we had a four hour drive down to Tamanjaya where we had a surprise welcome ceremony with the whole village turning out for us, very embarrassing! We stayed in a very comfortable home stay here and in the evening there were Colugo gliding around the palm trees in the grounds.

Next morning we took a fast boat across the bay to finally land on Ujung Kulon and this was followed by a hike through the forest where we started to encounter rhino signs, urine sprays, trampled areas and footprints.



Rhino footprint

On arriving at the first nights camp I had a swim in the sea followed by dinner on the beach during which I was eaten alive by small sand flies, over fifty bites around one ankle which raged for the next week. We were up early again for the eight kilometre hike along the beach to our base camp. This was really hard

work and a relief to finally arrive in the rhino area after three days of travelling. Camp conditions were extremely basic. We were accompanied by a large team of rangers, guides, porters and cooks, eleven of which remained in camp throughout the trip just to support the two of us. Slight overkill, no wonder it was such an expensive trip, also gave us a headache when it came to tipping later on!

Most of the rhino activity is at night and the next eight days in Ujung Kulon followed a similar pattern, we spent the nights on bamboo tree platforms built twenty foot or so up and overlooking mud wallows or middens. This was usually from around 4pm through til about 7am when we headed back to camp. Here the camp cooks supplied us with enormous quantities of food of varying quality and endless cups of tea, no problem with that. The days around camp were tedious and spent relaxing, swimming or just resting on a plastic sheet on the floor. The rangers built a palm shelter to provide shade from the intense sun. There was no bedding provided which was a bit of a surprise and things were fairly uncomfortable, especially after ten days of sleeping rough. A sleeping mat would have made a lot of difference. We knocked together some basic furniture, such as a table and chairs from debris on the beach.





While on the viewing platforms Steve and I did alternate two hour shifts with one resting while the other watched or listened for any signs of movement. These were long nights and there was little return for the hours we sat up there. On the third night we heard a snorting sound at around seven thirty and the ranger grabbed a spotlight, it was a rhino approaching the wallow. We sat in anticipation in the darkness for around twenty minutes when suddenly the rhino let out a loud snorting alarm call right by the wallow but it was behind some palms just out of sight and retreated into the forest. They think it must have got our scent. Tracks in the morning showed it was a mother with a young one, and only 10 metres from where we were sat. This explained it being so cautious and they said that if a lone adult came to the wallow it wouldn't be too concerned even with the spotlight turned on and using flash photography. Next evening around five thirty and still in daylight we heard the rhino sound again but then nothing further all night and it rained heavily, really uncomfortable night hiding under a plastic sheet. On the fifth evening on the platform just before darkness a Javan Mouse deer briefly wandered across the clearing. The remainder of that night and the following three there were no further signs of rhinos. Other than that the only mammals in eight days were some Plantain squirrels and Common Palm civet. After quite a big effort it was disappointing to be leaving the rhino area without a sighting. We hiked across the peninsula stopping at a grassland area where Banteng occur. We saw a nice group of these smart looking cows, mainly brown females and one smart male, black with white rump and socks.



Banteng

Here we said our goodbyes to some of the rangers especially Kani who had accompanied us on the nights viewings. Next we headed over to Peucang island for a night. We had to go by canoe from the jetty to the main boat one at a time and the young guy steering managed to capsize the canoe, tipping me and my bag into the sea. Luckily my camera gear and passport survived but my mobile phone was knackered. Not amused! I had time to go snorkelling before dark but it was pretty murky and some stingers in the water so I gave it up. During the evening many Rusa deer appeared on the grass clearing by our chalets.



Rusa Deer

Most of the rest of my time here was spent drying my things out. From here it was two days back to Jakarta by boat and car via Taman Jaya and Carita. We had been asked to attend a press conference with WWF at the end of the trip but this was cancelled when they learned that we had dipped on the rhino.

This was a fairly tough going trip and also quite expensive and I initially thought that I wouldn't want to do it again. Now I feel I must do it again as I really want to clap eyes on that rhino!

Contacts for anybody else wanting to try:

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Mammal Trip list

Taman Negara

Grey Bellied Squirrel

Dark Tailed Niviventer

Malayan Tapir

Long Tailed Macaque

Small Toothed Palm Civet

Mount Gede

Sunda Black Banded Squirrel

Javan (Ebony) Langur

Three Striped Ground Squirrel

Horsfield's Treeshrew

Javan Mongoose

Grizzled (Silvery) Langur

Schreiber's Bat

Halimum National Park

Red Giant Flying Squirrel

Javan Palm Civet

Common Palm Civet

Black Eared Pygmy Squirrel

Black Giant Squirrel

Javan Gibbon

Grizzled Langur

Indomalayan Niviventer

Ujung Kulon

Colugo

Large Flying Fox

Ebony Langur

Common Palm Civet

Plantain Squirrel

Javan Mouse Deer

Banteng

Rusa Deer

Javan Rhino – Heard only at ten metre range – Gutted!

