



## **TRIP REPORT: IN SEARCH OF BORNEO'S BIG 5!**

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**TONIGHT HARDCORE! THESE WERE THE LEGENDARY WORDS UTTERED BY OUR LOCAL GUIDE WHEN WE ENTERED THE RAINFOREST IN BORNEO. OUR MISSION: LOOKING FOR THE BORNEAN CLOUDED LEOPARD! A DARING JOURNEY WHICH NO SINGLE GROUP HAS UNDERTAKEN WITH SUCCESS. SO, PERFECT FOR STARLING! AND WE WERE VERY KEEN TO TAKE UP THE CHALLENGE...**



*In the autumn of 2015 we were asked by STARLING followers to organise an expedition to look for the Bornean Clouded Leopard. Straight away we put our local contacts in south-east Asia to work and after some thorough searching they handed us the key to success. This magnificent cat had been spotted a few times in a remote area of high quality rain forest in the centre of Borneo. The time was there to plan an expedition. In a matter of moments, 7 participants booked themselves onto the trip in order to obtain front row seats for this unique quest.*

## PLEASANT FIRST ENCOUNTER

End of August, 'dry season' in Borneo. After a smooth connection we landed in Sandakan and completed the short transfer to Sepilok. A popular spot among nature lovers and a nice place to start our trip. A fabulous canopy walk (walkways in the canopies of the trees of the rain forest) and walking the trails (small hiking paths in the wood) in the morning and evening yielded the first few sightings. **Wallace's Hawk-eagle** on his nest, **Prevost's and Giant Squirrel** and a **Red Giant Flying Squirrel** flying past overhead at close proximity. The first **Philippine Slow Loris** together with **Rufous-collared Kingfisher, Long-tailed parakeets, Cinnamon-headed Green-pigeon, Bushy-crested and Black Hornbills, Paradise Tree-snake, Gray-tailed Racer and Black-crowned Pitta**. We also saw our first **Orangutan** here. The Orangutans in this area are probably animals from a rescue programme as a result of logging in the region. So we had to be patient a little while longer to see the real 100% wild examples.

## MAMMALS, BIRDS AND NATURE

After a successful evening and morning in Sepilok, we travelled to the spot where it was all going to happen. A well maintained settlement of park rangers in the middle of nowhere, with basic to standard but very well looked after accommodation, would be our base camp for the next five nights. We were welcomed heartily by our no-nonsense team leader and his tribe of enthusiastic drivers and spotters. After our check-in and our first delicious Asian meal, we were briefed about the plans for the next few days and nights. Our days were al-



located in various ways with great flexibility and a nice offer of parallel activities. Each participant was able to determine his own focus, whether it would be on mammals alone, or a mix of birds and mammals or more of a general nature experience. It's great that all those individual preferences are possible here.

## ANIMALS IN THE SPOTLIGHTS, LITERALLY!

In the morning you could go on a tour looking for large mammals. Various families of **Bornean Pigmy Elephants, Red Langurs and Yellow-throated Marten** were spotted as well as a whole raft of smaller mammals and some exceptionally large species of birds. In addition, the mornings also consisted of hiking excursions which were organised aimed at spotting birds. A nice collection of Pittas showed themselves with **Blue-banded Pitta, Blue-headed Pitta, Bornean Banded Pitta, Hooded Pitta and Black-crowned Pitta**. Cherry on the cake was the first ever sighting of a hybrid **Blue-headed X Bornean Banded Pitta**! An indication of the high density of Pittas in this area. Another fun observation were the endemic **Storm's Stork and a pair of White-fronted Falconets** near our accommodation, all possible hornbills including the rare **White-crowned Hornbill** and spectacular **Helmeted hornbills, Red-bearded Bee-eaters, Great Slaty Woodpecker, many broadbills with among others Dusky and Green broadbill, Banded and Rufous Collared Kingfisher, numerous Babblers with the rare Abbot's babbler, etc.** Extra mammals during the day excursions were **Bearded Pigs, North Bornean Gibbon and Bornean Pigmy Squirrel**. After a siesta during the hottest part of the day, we were ready again to go out by late afternoon. Here too, participants could choose what to do: hiking or a tour. Both options were always concluded with a spontaneous brief spotlighting tour. This is an excursion with the help of some strong lights to briefly put the nightlife, normally hidden from view because of the dark, in the spotlight. This way we were optimising and making maximum use of our chances to spot the Bornean Clouded Leopard, the main aim of this trip.

## STARLING: ALERT DAY AND NIGHT

After the evening meals a night programme was planned in. The basic nocturnal spotlighting tours would last about three hours, until just before midnight. Those who wanted to could continue spotlighting for a few more hours. And these nocturnal spotlighting tours would always yield a wealth of observations. And all due to the merits of the local team. Without any doubt they are indispensable in this immense and vast area, due to their adapted style of driving, safari jeeps and spotters who are experts at putting everything in the spotlight, allowing our participants to have the optimal chances of seeing everything for as long and as beautiful as possible and to photograph things, without having to think about other things. The experience of the spotters plays a very important role in the strategy of the observations and the behaviour of the animals, which is different every time. The group of 7 participants and guides were divided into two safari jeeps. The chances of spotting a Cloud-ed Leopard were greatly enhanced by doing this but it also implied the risk that one of the groups was going home empty handed.... This 'problem' will be avoided in the future with a customised safari-bus so the whole group can stick together.

## EXCEPTIONAL OBSERVATIONS, EACH AND EVERY ONE

For the comfort and the convenience of most of the observations, splitting in two smaller groups was the best thing to do. In total, with using the two jeeps, 8 noteworthy spotlighting tours were organised. During these nocturnal trips we enjoyed a number of fabulous observations of a few dozen mammal species. We could always count on seeing **Bornean Striped Palm Civet, Malay Civet, Binturong, Leopard Cat (15+), Greater Mouse-deer, Red Giant Flying Squirrel and Thomas's Flying Squirrel. At regular intervals we had the special Bornean Colugo in sight, Bornean Pigmy Elephant, Philippine Slow Loris, Sambar Deer and Island Palm Civet. Extra fun mammal species during our stay were Moonrat, Long-tailed Porcupine, Western Tarsier, Large Flying Fox, Bornean Yellow Muntjac, Diadem Roundleaf Bat and probably Small-clawed Otter.**

## FOR EVER IMPRINTED ON OUR RETINA

The highlights during this part of the trip were diverse. A **Reticulated Python** of a few metres length on the road and a pair of **Bornean Ground-Cuckoos** in the swamp will always stay with us. Just like our very first wild **Orangutans**. A mother with a young right near the road and a dominant male performing a show for us a bit later on. The biggest surprise for the mammals during this trip was the phenomenal **BORNEAN SUN BEAR** which everyone was able to adore for several minutes in all his glory at extremely close proximity. Even more, during our 6 day stay we observed 2 different bears on 4 occasions. Unprecedented top quality. But what about the main aim of this unique group trip? What's come of that?



## CLOUDED LEOPARD OR NO CLOUDED LEOPARD

During the third night of our expedition, group 1 decided to travel south. There was a nice atmosphere in the jeep. We really believed in it. But all was quiet that night, very quiet. Bend after bend the spotlights lit up the road. Nothing ... Until on the way back, completely unexpected our lights lit up two frontal eyes on the side of the road. They immediately disappeared into the vegetation, followed by a long cat's tail. "**CLOUDED LEOPARD**. Get out of the car now and get your camera," our local guide said calmly. We jumped out of the car, even though not everyone in the group had seen the animal, or even comprehended what had happened. No more eyes that appeared, no rustling in the undergrowth. The cat was nowhere to be seen. "This must be the worst observation of Clouded Leopard ever..." our guide muttered.



## PIERCING EYES

Nervously we took up our positions on the side of the road which would allow us to look deep into the forest. Will the cat appear again? What seemed like hours were actually mere minutes. And suddenly 10 minutes later: BINGO! The **Clouded Leopard** walked past our group at about 15 metres distance, she came out of the vegetation and walked past us in a clearing. She stopped and looked in our direction with piercing eyes. Soon she lost interest in us and walked on in complete silence and disappeared into the nightly jungle. Group 1 had achieved what they came out to do.

## NOT FOR EVERYONE ...

Unfortunately group 2 concluded the last spotlighting tour of this area without seeing the Bornean Clouded Leopard. Luckily the participants who had not seen the Clouded Leopard, were able to place this very well and still had an enormous feeling of success whilst travelling to the next area. This is one of our most challenging objectives to date on a nature trip in a completely unpredictable wild nature. Maybe it was this positive attitude which attracted an unexpected apotheosis ...

## ... OR MAYBE?

Whilst leaving the park, on our way to the next destination, group 2 was in front. All of a sudden they halted near a group of loudly singing **North Borneo Gibbons**. Full of admiration we observed the vigorous visual and vocal display. Back in the car, an unbelievable thing happened. Right in front of the car a huge male **BORNEAN CLOUDED LEOPARD** crossed the road and everyone had the opportunity to see him in broad daylight!! During a pursuit on foot one happy person witnessed this mysterious cat disappear into the jungle! Simply W-O-W!!! There are no words which can describe this feeling and it is with extremely happy faces of disbelief that we say our last goodbye to this very special place.



## ONTO THE NEXT LOCATION

Our next location was the famous Kinabatang river. This is the place par excellence to see the **Proboscis Monkey**. During the first boat trip a few families were seen as well as **Silvered Langur, Pig-tailed and Long-tailed Macaque**. The nocturnal spotlighting tours brought us **Barred Eagle-owls, Large Frogmouth, Buffy Fish Owls and as highlight Oriental Bay Owl** as well as numerous gigantic **Salt-water Crocodiles**. The most spectacular surprise of this part of the trip was undoubtedly the **BANDED CIVET!** A top species and deserved reward for those persevering during the rather low-yielding spotlighting tours in this area. The morning excursions were aimed predominantly at birds and produced **Storm's Stork, Bornean Bristlehead, Black-and-red broadbills, Grey-headed Fish-eagle, Lesser Adjutant and many species of Kingfishers** that let themselves be observed exceptionally well. Among others, the gigantic **Stork-billed Kingfisher and the minuscule Oriental Dwarf Kingfisher** were the largest and smallest observed birds. During the second afternoon we drove to Gomatong Caves to go searching for the various kinds of swiftlets and to observe the natural phenomena of millions of flying bats. For more than half an hour a cloud of **Wrinkle-lipped Bats** emerged from the wood and flew over our heads. **Bat Hawks, Peregrine Falcons and Hawk-eagles** were hunting the bats, with or without success. A top-flight impressive nature experience!

## FROGS, VIPERS AND A TARANTULA

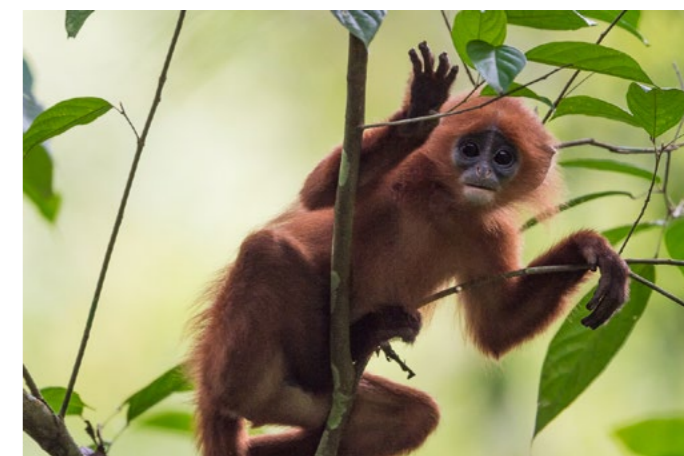
We concluded the trip in Danum Valley. Mammals in this area were mainly Leopard Cat, **Malayan Civet, Bearded Pig, Prevost's Squirrel, Diadem Roundleaf Bat and the extraordinary Western Tarsier**. The most notable birds were **Bornean Wren-babbler, Striped Wren-babbler, Red-Naped and Scarlet-rumped Trogon, Crested Jay, Short-toed coucal, Bornean Bristlehead, Banded broadbill, Rufous piculet, some fleeting Great Argus, Crested Fireback, ...** A nocturnal walk resulted in the stunning observations of nine types of frogs of which the most spectacular : **File-eared Tree-frog, Wragler's Pit-Viper and a very imposing Tarantula**.

## FROM TROPICAL HEAT, TO THE REFRESHING MOUNTAINS

As our final destination, Mount Kinabalu was on the programme. Two weeks of hot and humid lowland rainforest were exchanged for a much more pleasant temperature and wide range of new fauna and flora. We managed to muster the energy needed in order to catch sight of evocative birds like the endemic **Whiteheads Trogon and Spider Hunter**. Both species are considered by many as being the finest representatives of their family in the world! A fantastic goal to close the trip. We stayed in a beautiful lodge located just outside the national park. Every day we were dropped off at dawn at the well-maintained trail in the park and we managed to add a nice range of birds to our list of observations. **Whiteheads broadbill, Chestnut-headed and Red-breasted Partridge, the tiny Bornean Pygmy Stubtail and Pygmy Ibon, Eye-browed Jungle Flycatcher, Everett's Thrush, Fruit Hunters, etc.** The highlight came only on the last day. After searching for several days, we still had not found a Trogon or Spider hunter but we had gotten a better idea of the different habitats located in the park. The last morning we decided which were the best habitats for our final target species and the many hours spent searching were rewarded with a beautiful male Whiteheads Trogon and less than four Whiteheads Spider Hunters in three different locations. The atmosphere in the group was euphoric and with a broad smile on our faces we were able to conclude this trip. Fully charged after this overdose of tropical beauty of nature we returned home after 2 weeks. What will be the next impossible goal? Okapi?!

## TO BE CONTINUED

This successful expedition and the Borneo experience signal only the start for STARLING. We will be offering various formulas of nature trips to Borneo in the coming years. We will be adding it on the STARLING menu: mammal trips in search of the Bornean Clouded Leopard, a bird trip in search of endemic species, a general nature trip to Borneo and a nature photography trip to Borneo. This will give everyone in the STARLING family the opportunity to experience this unique paradise. Keep an eye on our website and be the first to register.



## TRIP MAMMAL LIST

Large flying fox: several seen along the road in Deramakot

Large-eared Horseshoe Bat: Gomatong Cave

Diadem leafnosed bat: 2, Deramakot + Danum

Bat spec. (see pictures)

Wrinkle-lipped bat: 1.000.000 Gomatong Cave

Moonrat: 1 along the road

Mountain treeshrew: Mt. Kinabalu

Plain tree shrew: 1

Slender tree shrew: only seen by few

Sunda shrew: Mt. Kinabalu

Colugo: 10+, one male during daytime Kinabatang

Philippine slow loris: several seen on different occasions

**Western Tarsier: 2+ seen, 1 stunning at Danum**

Red langur: fairly common Gomantong caves, few in Danum and Deramakot

Silvered langur: 1 family Kinabatang Greater mouse deer: fairly common Deramakot

Proboscis monkey: common Kinabatang

Long tailed macaque: common Kinabatang, also in Danum

Pig-tailed macaque: less common as Long-tailed in Kinabatang, also at Deramakot

Borneon gibbon: Deramakot, several groups (thamx to alarm call, we saw Clouded leopard!)

**Orangutan: several wild animals seen, males and females. Beauty...**

Prevost squirrel: sereral seen, Deramakot, Sepilok, Kinabatagng, Danum

Giant squirrel: several seen (Sepilok, Mt. Kinabalu)

Whiteheads pygmy squirrel: Mt. Kinabalu

Borneon mountain ground squirrel: Mt. Kinabalu

Jentink's squirrel: Mt. Kinabalu

Kinabalu squirrel: Mt. Kinabalu

Brooke's squirrel: Mt. Kinabalu

Ear spot squirrel: few

Plaintain squirrel: fairly common in the lowlands

Bornean pygmy squirrel: several seen

Giant red flying squirrel: common

Thomas's flying squirrel: fairly common

**Sunbear: 2 on 4 different occasions. CRACKING!**

**Yellow throated marten: 2 on the road in Deramakot**

Small clawed otter: probably this species, few youngsters

Malay civet: common

Island palm civet: 5+

Short tailed mongoose:

Bornean striped palm civet: fairly common

Banded palm civet: 1 along the banks Kinabatang, STUNNING!

Binturong: several individuals

**Bornean Clouded leopard: 2 individuals. One during night drive, one during daytime**

Leopard cat: 15+, fairly common

Bornean pygmy elephant: fairly common

Bearded pig: Danum, Deramakot

Greater mouse deer: fairly common at deramakot

Lesser mouse deer: probably at Deramakot

Yellow muntjac: 2

Red muntjac: probably 1

Sambar deer: few, comman at Danum



