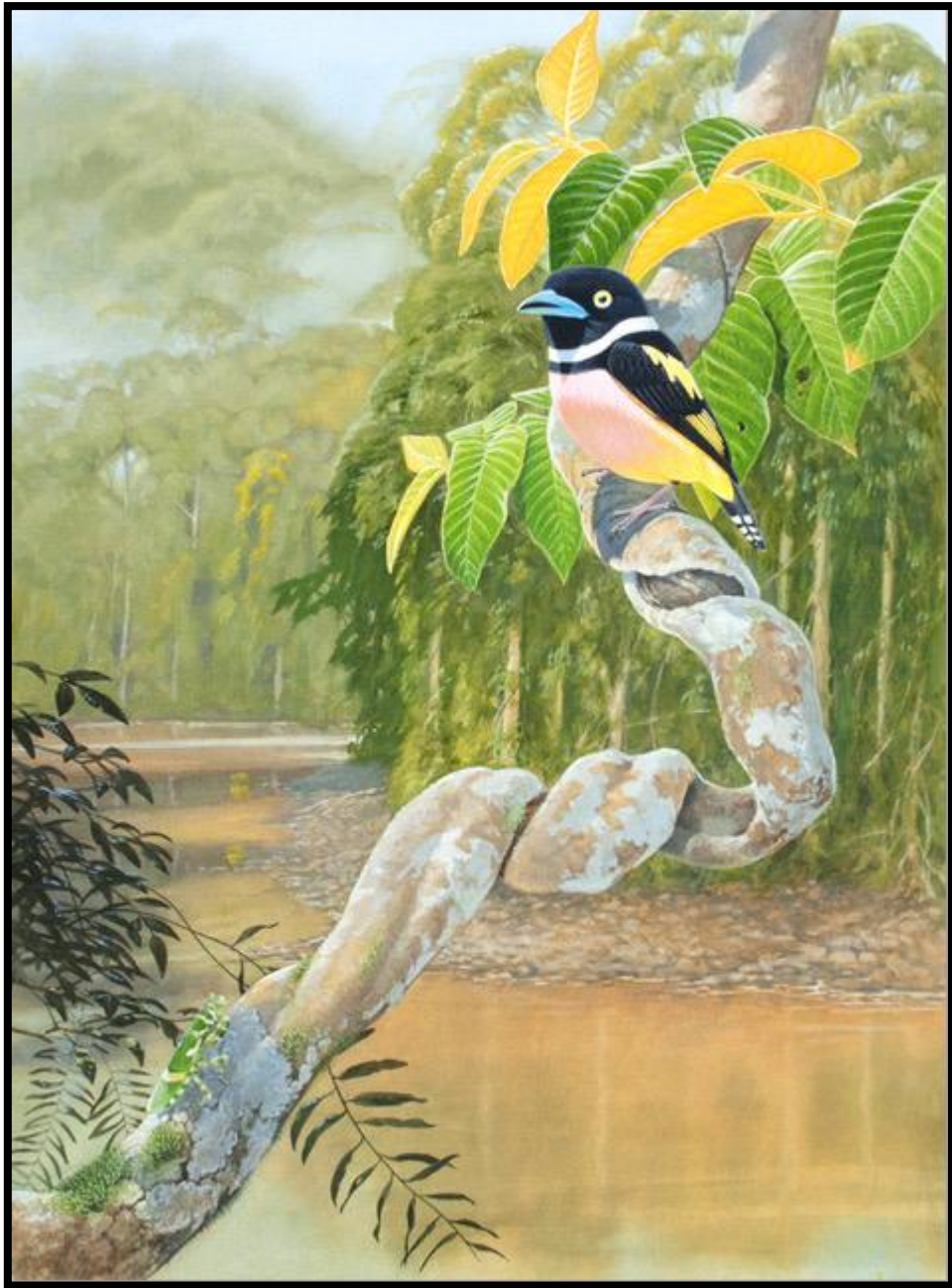


## Sabah 4–23 April 2018

Trip report by David Andrew



**Black-and-yellow Broadbill, Imbak Canyon** *Gouache by Peter Marsack*

In April 2018 I helped organise and co-led a tour to Sabah, East Malaysia (Borneo) for a group of Australian wildlife artists, with the aim of showing them an interesting cross-section of the region's mammals and birds. The tour was co-led by Julia Landford, founder of NatureArt Lab (NAL – see acknowledgments at the end of this report) and Peter Marsack, bird painter and illustrator of the recently published *Australian Bird Guide*.

I first visited Sabah exactly 20 years ago, when I was working for Lonely Planet, and I'm happy to report that if anything the wildlife-watching has gone from merely brilliant to stellar. Sabah is an

outstanding wildlife destination, and in my experience offers the best mammal-watching outside of East Africa (although I have barely touched the Neotropics and I am happy to be disabused on this point). The main difference between my two trips was that this time I felt no compunction to climb Mount Kinabalu, confident in the knowledge that I had conquered its mighty shoulders as a younger man.

A total of **47** mammal species was identified in just under three weeks, not including several unidentified rodents. Highlights included a **Clouded Leopard**, encountered by a lucky few at Imbak Canyon; a **Shrew-faced Ground-squirrel** at Kinabatangan Wetlands Resort (KWR); **Pen-tailed Treeshrew**, **Moonrat**, **Sunda Stink Badger**, **Banded Civet** and **Long-tailed Porcupine** at Deramakot; an obstreperous male **Asian** ('Bornean Pygmy') **Elephant**; plus a host of others that are now almost *de rigueur* on Sabah wildlife-watching trips ...

### Itinerary

After a couple of days around Kota Kinabalu (KK), which included some birding at Gunung Alab and a morning trip to Manukan Island offshore from KK, the tour proper took in Mount Kinabalu Park (5–7 April), Poring Hot Springs and Sabah Tea Cottages (8 April), Imbak Canyon (9–11 April), the Sepilok area (12–13 April) including the Sun Bear Rehabilitation Centre, and the Kinabatangan River (14–15 April).

After most of the group returned to Australia, Cobie Brinkman and I headed for now-legendary Deramakot (16–19 April); I then spent two days back at the Kinabatangan River (20–21 April) looking (unsuccessfully) for Giant Pitta (a bird); then rejoined Cobie for two days in the Tawau Hills area with Tom Hewitt, CEO of Adventure Alternative Borneo (AAB), to check out a herd of Elephants moving through a commercial softwood plantation.

### Logistics

All internal travel, accommodation, transport, meals and guides were organised by Adventure Alternative Borneo, who did an excellent job and whom I wholeheartedly recommend. AAB taps directly into the needs of wildlife watchers (as well as others) and uses the best available guides. AAB can be contacted at [www.adventurealternative.com/borneo/](http://www.adventurealternative.com/borneo/).

### Weather

April is normally one of Sabah's driest months and we weren't greatly inconvenienced by rain. Mosquitoes weren't a problem, in fact there were almost zero encounters, and leeches were also noticeable by their absence, until ... my return to the Kinabatangan River on 20–21 April was noteworthy as a mosquito and leech Armageddon; also, Tawau Hills Park had a healthy leech population; in both cases these ghastly bloodsuckers may have been stirred up by short but heavy showers.

### The good stuff

A total of **47** mammal species was identified during the trip, although not every species was seen by every participant and only a lucky few saw the **Clouded Leopard** at Imbak Canyon.

Taxonomy follows the *Phillipps' Field Guide to the Mammals of Borneo and their Ecology*. **NB** Any comments or queries re sightings etc are welcome; please contact me on [dandrew404@gmail.com](mailto:dandrew404@gmail.com).

**Sunda Short-nosed Fruit-bat** Two roosting under palm fronds outside the Sabah Parks café on Manukan Island on 4 April. A beautiful little fruit bat.

**Lesser Woolly Horseshoe Bat** Three roosting in a shed at KWR (15 April) were identified by our guide, who had previously had them ID'ed by Fiona Reid.

**House Shrew** Based on habitat (degraded), proximity to humans (close) and temperament (it bit the guide) I judged our solitary shrew sighting at Sabah Tea Rooms to be of this species (7/4).

**Moonrat** One at Deramakot (18/4), where they are apparently not uncommon.

**Pen-tailed Treeshrew** One at Deramakot (18/4) crossing the road about 500 m from the settlement. Because I missed Clouded Leopard this was a contender for mammal of the trip.

**Plain Treeshrew** One at Rainforest Discovery Centre (RDC) on 13 April; one at Deramakot (18/4).

**Lesser Treeshrew** One posed obligingly on the feeding station at Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre on 12 April.

**Bornean Colugo** One spotted during a nocturnal river cruise at KWR (14/4); several at Deramakot, one at Tawau Hills (22/4).



**Bornean Colugo, Deramakot** Photo by Cobie Brinkman

**Slow Loris** Distant treetop views at Imbak Canyon (9/4); one feeding on sap at the Rainforest Discovery Centre offered exceptional point-blank views (11/4); seen nightly at Deramakot.

**Silvered Langur** Several seen daily along the Kinabatangan River (13–14/4, 21/4), including some females with orange youngsters, although this species was never common.

**Red (Maroon) Langur** Several at Deramakot (16/4); also at Tawau Hills where pale (golden) individuals were seen in a mixed troupe (22/4).





**Maroon Langur, Deramakot** Photo by Cobie Brinkman

**Proboscis Monkey** Several troupes of Borneo's star primate were seen daily along the Kinabatangan River (13–14/4).

**Long-tailed Macaque** Not as common as expected; seen near Sandakan (11/4) and at Sepilok (12/4), but the most interesting sightings were of them puddling on the Kinabatangan shoreline (13–14/4).

**Pig-tailed Macaque** There were some fine males with their troupes at RDC (12–13/4); also seen at Deramakot and along the Kinabatangan.

**North Borneo Gibbon** Uncommon and heard more often than seen; some of the group got a glimpse at Imbak Canyon during a bird walk on 11 April.

**Bornean Orang-utan** Another primate highlight; wild individuals were spotted along the Kinabatangan River on 13 April and again on 14 April.



Long-tailed Macaque youngsters, Kinabatangan River Photo by Peter Marsack

**Kinabalu Squirrel** Two near the start of the Silau Silau Trail at Mount Kinabalu Park (7/4).

**Prevost's Squirrel** Common at RDC and at Sepilok Orang-utan Rehabilitation Centre (12–13/4); some were also seen at KWR (13–15/4); this was the black morph with chestnut belly – a handsome squirrel even by Borneo standards.

**Jentink's Squirrel** 2 or 3 of these arboreal squirrels were seen at Mount Kinabalu Park on 6 April.

**Low's Squirrel** One near the garbage bins below Timpohon Gate, Mount Kinabalu Park (6/4).

**Plantain Squirrel** The common lowland squirrel; this one was particularly in evidence in the Sepilok area (12–13/4) and at KWR (13–15/4).

**Ear-spot Squirrel** One was seen well at the entrance to the Sun Bear Centre at Sepilok (12/4).

**Brooke's Squirrel** One grabbing snacks at the Sepilok Orang-utan feeding platform (12/4) was identified by our guide. (According to Phillipps this is a mid-altitude species; does anyone have experience of this species at Sepilok or elsewhere?)

**Bornean Black-banded Squirrel** Two or three of these active, arboreal squirrels were seen at Mount Kinabalu Park on 6 April.

**Whitehead's Pygmy Squirrel** Two of these delightful pygmy squirrels were seen below the Timpohon Gate at Mount Kinabalu Park, one posing beautifully at eye level, on 6 April.

**Giant Squirrel** One was a real crowd-pleaser outside the Balsam Restaurant at Mount Kinabalu Park on 7 April; individuals were also seen at the Sun Bear Centre (12/4) and Rainforest Discovery Centre (13/4).





**Sunda Giant Squirrel** (back end) *Photo by Peter Marsack*

**Bornean Mountain Ground Squirrel** Several at Timpohon Gate (6/4) and outside the Balsam Restaurant (7/4), Mount Kinabalu Park.

**Shrew-faced Ground Squirrel** I had a lucky sighting of this species at KWR around 1 pm on 14 April, which drove home how Sabah keeps on giving, even in the heat of the day when normal people are having a siesta. The most noticeable thing about it was its huge, puffed out, striped tail (contra the illustration in Phillipps). I didn't get to see its face but it was obviously a ground squirrel, bigger than the common one but too small to be Tufted Ground Squirrel. It made no attempt at furtiveness, clattering about the leaf litter like an army of trolls, ran under the boardwalk a few metres in front of me and took off into the undergrowth.

**Black Flying Squirrel** One at Imbak Canyon was largely ignored while we searched for a Clouded Leopard on 10 April; this species was also seen at RDC (11/4), Deramakot (15/4) and at Tawau Hills Park (22/4)

**Thomas' Flying Squirrel** One on the night drive at Imbak Canyon on 10 April; common at Deramakot.

**Red Giant Flying Squirrel** Seen on night drives at Imbak Canyon on 9 April; also on night walks at RDC on 11–12 April, where we watched one gliding from its nest tree at RDC on 12 April; common at Deramakot.

**Malayan Porcupine** Two sightings at Deramakot (16 & 18/4).

**Long-tailed Porcupine** One at Deramakot (16/4).

**Sunda Skunk (Teledu)** Great views of one at Deramakot (17/4); yes it's a giant skunk, but I find the name Stink Badger more evocative.

**Small-clawed Otter** A group of about six cavorted about 2 m from us below the KWR boardwalk on 13 April. A trip highlight.

**Bornean Striped Palm Civet** This and the next two species were the 'go-to' civets at Deramakot, seen nightly but largely ignored by us as we tried to cover as much ground as possible to eke out the cats.

**Island Palm Civet** One was seen briefly on our first RDC night walk (11 April), otherwise common on all nights at Deramakot.

**Malay Civet** Common but one of my favourites; seen nightly at Deramakot and also at the softwood plantation near Tawau Hills (21/4).

**Banded Civet** One seen briefly but well at Deramakot (16/4).

**Clouded Leopard** A lucky few encountered this elusive cat at Imbak Canyon as we were driving back to our accommodation at dusk on 10 April.

**Leopard Cat** Seen nightly at Deramakot, though they were rather shy and skittish.

**Asian ('Bornean Pygmy') Elephant** Approximately a dozen were encountered at a softwood plantation near Tawau Hills (21/4), including one boisterous male who reminded us that even pygmy elephants shouldn't be trifled with.



Asian ('Bornean Pygmy') Elephant, near Tawau Hills Park Photo by Cobie Brinkman

**Bearded Pig** Individuals were seen around the KWR (13–15/4); one featured along the Kinabatangan during an early morning river cruise (14/4); also several at Deramakot.





**Bearded Pig** *Photo by Peter Marsack*

**Lesser Mousedeer** One posed nicely near the KWR boardwalk during a night walk on 13 April; another nice view at Deramakot (16/4).

**Greater Mousedeer** Two were seen on a night drive at Imbak Canyon on 10 April; also at Tawau Hills Park (22/4)

**Sambar** A semi-tame one hung around KWR (13–15/4), even loitering around the boat landing; Common nightly at Deramakot, especially near the compound.

**Bornean Yellow Muntjac** One on the road during a heavy afternoon downpour at Deramakot (16/4).





Lesser Mousedeer, Deramakot Photo by Cobie Brinkman

**Sunda Pangolin, Otter-civet, Binturong and Marbled Cat** were seen by other groups and individuals while I was at Deramakot; and a herd of **Banteng** was encountered by another group at Imbak Canyon during our stay there.

### Other things

**Birds** As there were no hard-core birders in the NAL group we didn't work too hard at winking out Sabah's glorious babblers, although we saw enough star turns to keep people ooh-ing and ah-ing, e.g. six hornbill spp, Bat Hawk, Bornean Green Magpie, Green Broadbill, Storm's Stork, Oriental Bay Owl, Buffy Fish Owl, Red-bearded Bee-eater, Stork-billed Kingfisher etc.

**Herps** Apart from a few choice reptiles (Reticulated Python, Grey-tailed Racer (which a taxi driver confidently informed me was a 'Banana Snake'), various cool geckoes, flying lizard etc), frogs were very much in evidence, even though it was the dry season. On one night walk at Tawau Hills Park we identified no less than eight species. So far as can be determined, the trip list was as follows:

**Wallace's Flying Frog**

**Giant River Toad**

**Giant River Frog**

**Harlequin Frog**

**File-necked Frog**

**Guardian Frog**

**White-lipped Stream Frog**

**Northern Torrent Frog**

**Hose's Rock Frog**

**Black-spotted (Foot-flagging) Frog**

**Kuhl's Stream Frog**

**Kinabalu Mountain Litter Frog**

**Four-lined Frog**

**Grass Frog**

**Greater Swamp Frog**  
**Bornean Narrow-mouthed Frog**



The author charming a Giant River Toad

**Contacts and acknowledgements**

NatureArt Lab (NAL) is run by Julia Landford in Canberra, Australia and offers courses and workshops in many different disciplines of wildlife art, as well as tours to different parts of Australia and the world. See [www.natureartlab.com.au](http://www.natureartlab.com.au) for details.

Peter Marsack teaches at NAL and accepts commissions; he can be contacted at [marsack@iinet.net.au](mailto:marsack@iinet.net.au).

Thank you to all the participants in the inaugural NAL wildlife artists' trip to Borneo (Cobie Brinkman, Jeff Isaacs, Alan Landford, Jill Male, Suzy Nethercott-Watson, Rita Parkinson, Judy and Peter Stevenson, Dianne and Jim Stockbridge, Claire Stoneman and Margaret Wattam), to our wildlife guides on the tour, at Deramakot and beyond (Siti, Mike and Shavez), fellow mammal (and bird) enthusiasts at Deramakot and Tom Hewitt of AAB for making it all happen.