

## Tapanuli orangutan

Trip report from December 2022 to Batang Toru to see the Tapanuli orangutan. I flew from Jakarta to Sibolga via Medan. I met Decky Chandrawan who I had arranged the trip with (+6282370434044) and Santo (+6281375727846) who would be driving us the three or so hours to the Tapanuli orangutan habitat. The drive was pretty scenic although the construction of the huge hydroelectric dam that threatens to split the Tapanuli orangutan's habitat in half was pretty hard to ignore.

After arriving we met the three other people who would be accompanying us over the next four days, Hasibuan, his son, Riswan, and Pandi. Within a few hundred metres we saw our first Tapanuli orangutan nest. It was months old though and we continued downwards for about 2 hours to the first camp. We camped near a fairly open area just outside the area where the real chance of seeing the orangutans was. Our tents were set up near a shack used by the locals for collecting durian from the what seemed like countless durian trees in the area. We went for a night walk down into the habitat looking for snakes and any nocturnal mammals that might make an appearance.

Not much to report in terms of mammals, a small toothed palm civet and an unidentified rat were all we saw in about 3 hours of walking but we did find a Sumatran pit viper and a bunch of frogs. Pangolins are sometimes encountered along this upper trail. A Sumatran tiger makes infrequent appearances around the edges of the durian trees, rather amusingly seemingly fond of eating the fallen durian. It had been a couple of weeks since it had showed up when I was there.



*Sumatran pit viper about to shed*

I woke up early to the sound of agile gibbons hollering all around before it got light. And not long after the booming call of a male Tapanuli orangutan was ringing out in the dark. A truly unforgettable experience. The male was in a different part of the forest than what we had anticipated which meant we would be going down steeper and deeper than had originally been planned. The siamangs took over from the agile gibbons as the sun came up and the clouds and mist started to clear up a bit.

Movement in the trees over behind the durian trees signaled the presence of the first primate I would actually see. A group of very shy Sumatran black langurs (*Presbytis sumatrana*) that hung around just long enough to get good views of the them jumping and free-falling but not long enough to get decent pictures. These langurs were my second main target after the orangutan and seem something of a neglected species. Interestingly everyone was referring to them as Thomas I think due to some confusion with the much more well-known Thomas' leaf monkey (*Presbytis thomasi*) from further north.



*Not Thomas. Black Sumatran langur*

We packed up the gear and made out way into the forest in the general direction we had heard the male in the morning. After about 30 minutes we came across another group of Sumatran black langurs high above a river. These guys too were exceptionally skittish and disappeared quickly. The terrain was pretty steep and slippery. I chose to go during the time the durian and jackfruit was fruiting as in theory it gave a better chance of finding the orangutans as they have quite a taste for it. This also meant it was rather wet.

We came across a couple of old nests, much more recent than the one we had seen the previous day. Huge piles of discarded chewed fruit under some trees further indicated we were in the right area, but again they were more than a few days old. We continued down the

vertiginous terrain for some time with the siamangs booming call coming and going with the parting of the clouds.



*No orangutans here*

We reached a river where the terrain flattened out briefly and this was where we would camp. A lone southern pig-tailed macaque was high in the trees above where we set up but he quickly made an exit as it became clear we were going to be staying. We stopped for food, ikan teri and rice before heading back up the hill to see if we could find some orangutans. We hiked for quite some time but no orangutans were to be found. As we reached the top again we did however get close to a group of agile gibbons. I got good views as they swung off over the crest of the hill and down into the valley on the other side but I think they are destined to remain one of my bogey animals when it comes to taking a decent photo.

Orangutan-less we made the slide/descent back to the camp with plans for another night walk around the flatter terrain alongside the river. No mammals to report from the night walk but we did get a Wagler's pit viper and some more frogs.



*Wagler's pit viper*

It rained a lot during the night and it was pretty chilly early morning. No one else was awake so I went for a walk along where we had gone the previous night. Again, no mammals just some birds, red-bearded bee-eater and some other stuff. The gibbons were noticeably quieter down by the river. I returned to camp after about an hour and finding nobody awake started to think about heading up the hill solo.

Fortunately, Riswan emerged from the tent just as I was planning to set off. After the customary black coffee and cigarettes breakfast he was ready to go and we set off up the hill. About 45 minutes up the hill we were pretty shocked to find a fresh orangutan nest on the side of the slope. It was about 4 metres of the ground and we spent quite a while trying to figure out if it was still occupied. Eventually it became clear no one was home and we searched the surrounding area for signs of the big orange ape. The remnants of the orangutan's breakfast littered the floor not so far from the nest but about 30 minutes of searching and waiting for sign of the orangutan's presence yielded nothing. Cue internal existential crisis of cursing my decision to go along the lower section near the river.

We sat down planning our next move as the path it appeared to have taken going off the discarded fruit and broken foliage dropped off into a very steep and impassable valley. And then movement in the trees back down the hill. We raced, slid, crept down to where the movement had been. And then a flash of orange, really, really bright orange. My initial reaction was one of confusion as it seemed almost too bright. Then a long arm shot up grabbing a handful of jackfruit. We were spotted not long after and the orangutan made a comedically fast and exaggerated departure high into the canopy and across the valley. She stopped at the very top of a distant tree to give a us a brief eyeballing then disappeared for good.



*Female orangutan running for the hills*

As I celebrated with Riswan, the one thing that stood out was just how vivid the orange had been. I hadn't really anticipated how fanta orange she was going to be.

We made our way back down to camp feeling very pleased with ourselves and shared the news with the rest of the camp. There was considerable disbelief that we had actually seen it until we got the camera out to prove it. Another ikan teri breakfast with the siamangs starting to call, and I found I was no longer harboring murderous intentions to the bee-eater that had distracted me earlier in the morning.

After packing up the tents we set out off in the direction the female had disappeared. We had no illusions of seeing the female again. The way she had fled, it was highly unlikely we would be seeing her again, but we were hoping her presence may have attracted the male who had been calling on the first night. Hasibuan took the lead now and suggested we split, him going deeper into the valley, me and Riswan sticking to the ridge and Decky in between. We hiked a few hours, hoping for some more orangutan action and were rewarded with the best views yet of the Sumatran black langur. A mother and juvenile grooming at eye-level over the side of a steep drop.

A while later Decky appeared saying Hasibuan was on the trail of an orangutan deep in the valley and he seemed to think it was the male. We eventually met up with Hasibuan and he led the way a little further down. It was obscured by branches for quite some time then the big male poked his head out and glared down. He took off immediately deeper into the valley, showering leaves and branches all the way. The terrain made following him tricky but

eventually he stopped for a short while giving good views before disappearing into an inaccessible part of the forest.

Hasibuan suggested we wait near one of the largest jackfruit trees in the area, saying he was likely to come back as that particular type of jackfruit was pretty irresistible to the orangutans. We sat and waited a while, with a group of siamangs passing close by overhead, followed by rhinoceros hornbill, before the big male returned as promised.



*Siamangs*

He made it clear we were not a welcome sight so close to the jackfruit tree and gave us a branch shaking, lip smacking display, before swinging back out of sight. He returned again moments later clearly unable to give up on the jackfruit. He crashed around up in the canopy before grabbing a few jackfruit. Clearly unimpressed with being watched while he ate he snapped off a big branch and tossed it down in our direction. It was a pretty ridiculous display of power. When we checked out the branch later it was pretty much the length and girth of a small tree.



*The big boss*

He made his way off back into the valley not long after and we headed back up to the ridge to set up camp. Then the rain started. It rained until the following morning when it stopped for about 2 hours around 6am before resuming again. We had a search around to see and found another new nest that had been made the previous evening but no orangutan. Then the heavens opened and the rain started and never stopped until the following day on the way back to the airport. We had been planning to check out a couple of locations outside the main orangutan habitat where closer views of the Sumatran black langurs are possible in the rubber plantations and also a good spot for siamang but the rain made that impossible.

The flights back from Sibolga to Medan was delayed for about 4 hours with little information as to what was happening. Not really unexpected but talking to a few people in the airport it seemed a very regular occurrence so just something to consider if you have a connecting flight in Medan.

Overall the trip surpassed my expectations and gave the kind of buzz that seeing the Sumatran and Bornean orangutans had somehow failed to provide. I don't know why but my previous orangutan experiences had just never given me the thrill I thought they would. Whether it was the challenge involved or the behavior we were lucky enough to witness, it far beyond anything than I had imagined. Seeing the huge male really was special and it was impossible to feel anything other than privileged to see him and be guests in his forest.

Special thanks to Hasibuan for finding the big male and making sure we go in the best position possible to see him. Also to Riswan for locating the female and being just as excited as me to see the orangutan.



*Tapanuli orangutan dream team*

Notes: The leeches are pretty crazy. There was a lot of rain which probably brought them out in force but be prepared for leeches and lots of them.

Rubber boots are pretty much a must.

Silvered langurs are seen on the other side of the river and require a lot of effort which maybe isn't worth it for a species that can be seen easily in a lot of other locations.

There is Durian absolutely everywhere. From what I was told October-December is the peak durian fruiting time and in theory provides the best chance of seeing the orangutans but all year is possible.

The black langurs are very very shy and quite a challenge to get near. As were all the primates I came across here. It is a very different experience to the established locations for seeing Sumatran and Borneo orangutans which is probably something to be aware of before planning a trip, but it is a truly amazing place and experience.

Feel free to contact me if you need more info:

<https://instagram.com/markleonspence?igshid=NzZlODBkYWE4Ng==>





*Honey Monstresque levels of fuzz*



*Huge trees and mist is the best*