

West Papua and Sulawesi (Oct 2023)

Background: When I was about 12 years old (I'm 33 now), I read in the Guinness book of records about a small toothed fruit bat, which was apparently one of the rarest mammals and was found only in Sulawesi. For more than 20 years I had dreamed of going to Sulawesi and Papua that lay further west, not to see the bat specifically but to visit this exotic island for its natural curiosities. After reading about



the bat, I promptly scribbled on a map of Sulawesi, Indonesia “small toothed fruit bat” (as shown in the picture below). Later when I was 25, I “discovered” Raja Ampat, the snorkeling paradise.

I'm from Chennai, India and have been working in Singapore for 4 years as an Upstream Process Development Scientist in a Biopharmaceutical company. My company recently closed, so as a jobless person with a month left to stay in Singapore I decided to take a trip to Sulawesi and West Papua, fulfilling my lifelong dream before I leave Singapore, back to India. I started my journey from Singapore to Makassar, Sulawesi on 9th October 2023 armed with *The Malay Archipelago*, a book by the British naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace who took a similar journey.

The objectives for the trip were,

- Kill a few days in Sulawesi since it made economical sense than to stay in expensive Singapore
- Snorkel in what is considered the world's place, Raja Ampat.
- See as many birds of paradise as I can.
- See if there were any mammals left in Papua.
- Apply for jobs and attend interviews as they come.

The Actual Trip: The 2.5 hour flight before landing gave views of ramang ramang (a karst rock formation) which I was to visit. From the airport to the hotel I used the help of Grab staff (an taxi app company), who were there in the arrival hall! This meant that even if you didn't have an internet connection or sim card you could get a Grab taxi. It was about 170,000 IDR including the toll for a 20 km journey. I'm sure it would be cheaper if you book directly by Grab app, but I was excited to see Grab staff in an airport (which doesn't exist in Singapore). What surprised me further was that people in Indonesia in general seemed happier than those in Singapore and Malaysia, countries that are richer than Indonesia. Most people in this part of Indonesia didn't know English, download the google translate Bahasa so that you can use it even if you are in a place with no internet. I stayed at hotel

Ramayana (being attracted to it by its name, a fantastic mythological Hindu tale). The hotel was very cheap (25 SGD incl breakfast). But the hotel was dated, nevertheless the staff were all helpful even if they only spoke Bahasa (The staff used google translate as well). They helped me get a sim card (35 gb for 30 days, 7 SGD I think), but there SIM didn't work. I didn't bother to register my phone's IMEI number when I filled up the online application for Indonesia customs. This didn't allow me to use telkomsel SIM card (although other companies do work, Telkomsel was the only provider in Raja Ampat). So I had to go to the Telkomsel office in Makassar (GRAPARI Telkomsel Makassar) and spend more than an hour to get it registered. Do yourself a favour, if going to sorong/raja ampat, **after passing through immigration you'll be given a QR code for customs declaration and IMEI registration, FILL IT UP if you are going to west papua.**

My first day was uneventful since I had work related stuff to attend to. My second day I decided to go to Ramang Ramang and Bantimurung. The taxi hire cost about 800,000 IDR from Makassar. Ramang Ramang boat ride and various entrance fees were about 250,00 IDR. The boat ride was quite pleasant but a short one. After the boat ride I reached a small village with boardwalks. You roam here to your



Figure 1 Views from the boat ride and karst formations in Ramang Ramang

hearts content and return to the boat. When I was trying to take pictures of a bird, the boat captain showed up and decided to show me around. That is when I first saw **Moor Macaques**, who's ass caught my attention. One was heart shaped and the other was pinkish colored! Wow!

Coming from India and later Singapore have always disliked Macaques for their rowdy behaviour across countries, but these chaps were well behaved, nevertheless territorial. Unfortunately this was the only encounter I had with any mammals. I failed to spot any bats in the caves. My next stop was bantimurung which turned out to be a disappointment since I just saw a waterfall and saw no rangers to take me to see the Makassar Tarsier. I wrote about this in mammalwatching.com and Carlos Bocos was kind enough to give me the exact location of the Bantimurung office.

I ended my day having pallubasa serigala served with rice (well cooked and tender cow liver and meat in a pepper soup. Sambal (chilli paste) and lemon were optional to be added on top, the South Indian in me obviously added both). It was all washed down with teh puncak harum (sweet tea).

My third day was uneventful, I just visited the picturesque 99 dome mosque and relished some sop korno campur kikil (beef rib soup) with a sambal that looked red but had green chilli mixed inside, heavenly!

Figure 2 Moor Macaques



Figure 3 Pallubasa serigala (beef pepper soup) and korno campur kikil (beef rib soup)



On my fifth day, thanks to the info given by Carlos Bocos I went to the Bantimurung forest excited about seeing my first Tarsier. I arrived at 5 pm sharp. Much to my himalayan dismay and frustration there was only one guide who knew where the Tarsiers were and he had already left for the forest sometime back. They said I can come back later or take another trip where they have the Tarsiers in cages and a guide can take me there (the trip would cost about 400,000 to 500,000 IDR). The staff in the park office were polite and courteous, nevertheless I was gutted that after 2 attempts I couldn't see the Makassar Tarsier. I decide not to see the captive tarsiers and return to the hotel. Anyway for the benefit of the future travelers I got the contact of a forest officer Rusman +62081244169257 , call him ahead incase you plan to see the Tarsiers or go bird watching in Bantimurung. I had a flight the next day to Sorong and hoped my lack of luck wouldn't follow me to Papua.

My plan was to spend 3 nights in Klabili village, but I was forced to make it 2 nights since I had an interview (via teams). I contacted Yoram in his (Facebook page: Birding Klabili Klabili Birding) (ph no: +62 081247080018). I used google translate to communicate with him since he spoke very basic English. He quoted 2 million IDR for 2 nights & 3 days of birding which was the cheapest by a huge margin that any Papuan village near Sorong quoted. Another person quoted a similar price, but was in Jayapura where the chance of seeing mammals seemed very low. Yoram and his wife picked me up at the airport and took me to the supermarket to buy whatever I wanted. I bought chicken, veggies (spinach), my favourite flavours in Indomie noodles (Aceh and rendang), etc. After which we went to eat is a small restaurant serving Indonesian food (there was KFC nearby, but I wasn't interested in western food). Next, we started to drive up the mountains. The ride was scenic and we did some birding on the way. After about 2 hours we reached Klabili village. The village even had a small and adorable cassowary which behaved more like a dog. The mountains surrounding village were covered in mist and I saw hornbills flying towards the misty mountains making for a very scenic setting.



Figure 4 A small Cassowary in Klabili Village

The place I stayed had a squat toilet and a dip mandi for bathing. The bedroom had a mosquito net, but no fan (If you can take a portable fan). Electricity was from 6pm to 6am using a generator. In the evening Yoram took me birding along with Yosias. Yosias usually carried my bag and helped Yoram in spotting birds. In the night at about 6-7pm dinner was served which consisted of rice, spinach (Kangkong),

chicken prepared with tomato. The food was surprisingly good (especially after reading the trip reports of many folks commenting about how terrible the food was), but I think westerners aren't used to the tough meat of the chicken, so I saw them avoiding the chicken. The meat resembled Kampong chicken meat, but I think it was the preparation style that made it tough. Sambal was available, so I added it to make the food spicier. At about 10 pm we went for what Yoram called "night birding", I did try to emphasize that I'm more interested in Cuscus or any mammals. We did some spotlighting in the boardwalk used to birding and after searching for about an hour only found one **Brujin's Pogonomelomys (lowland brush mouse)**. Since we didn't have a lot of success in the boardwalk Yoram said we'll spotlight in the road that runs near the village. We saw no mammals besides some fruit bats. I wasn't proficient in identifying the bats so I'm not certain of how many species I saw. We returned back to the village and I told Yoram I was disappointed that I didn't see any cuscus. My perception of Papua being a wildlife paradise soon came to face the stark reality of the rampant hunting (for food) by Papuans. A few days later in facebook I even saw a picture by a Papuan friend's friend near Nabire showing that he is blessed since he had successfully hunted 3 possums, 1 cuscus and a few bats. Yosias suggested we'll try spotlighting the next night near a patch of forest behind the village. But I had to go to sleep soon since I had to wake up at 4 am to see the 12 wired bird of paradise.

The next day we successfully saw the 12 wired bird of paradise. In hindsight, I should've brought an 1.4x extender, which would have been handy since my 600mm lens with apsc, which comes to 900mm was still quite inadequate to get close enough to the bird. That night we started spotlighting at 11 am near the forest behind the village. It was hard work trekking there since there were stones, layers of leaves and roots underneath. So, one had to spotlight both below and above. After searching for about 45 minutes my hopes were fading, finally Yoram had spotted something and excitedly whispered cuscus. It was the size of a rat, up the tree and not moving. I couldn't spot it at first so Yoram took my camera and snapped a few clicks to make sure I got something (I appreciated this quick thinking). Then I got a good view of it and identified it as a **Lowland Ringtail Possum**. Yoram climbed up a slope and told me to come along to get better pictures, I obliged. On the way down I slipped and tumbled on to Yoram, but luckily he had a good grip. I had bruised myself, but it was worth it. I got an excellent view of a wonderful marsupial. This was the first time I had seen a marsupial.



Figure 5 Lowland Ringtail Possum and Stripped Possum

We trekked further in and saw a **common echymipera (Common Spiny Bandicoot)** scurrying for cover. It soon disappeared into the forest, so I couldn't take a picture. Besides these mammals, we also saw a handsome tarantula and a crowned forest dragon. Feeling lucky I told Yoram we'll do a little bit of spotlighting in the boardwalk we usual do birdwatching in and as luck would have it spotted a **stripped possum** coming crashing down from a tree and then going up. We also spotted a brown tree snake. Yoram took a forested path away from the boardwalk and when we were finally about to end our walk I fell down and twisted my left foot ankle. I need both Yosias and Yoram's help to get up and slowly walk back to my accommodation. I applied some medicines on my ankle and went to sleep.

The next morning when I woke up I saw that my ankle had swollen a bit so I took a painkiller and went back to sleep deciding not to go birding early morning. I woke up at 10 am and told Yoram I'd like to see the King Bird of Paradise (probably the easiest to find in Klabili) and that will be the end of my time in Klabili. I wished to extend one more night (and sacrifice a day in Raja Ampat) but my ankle wasn't in good shape so I decided that it would be wise to recuperate in Raja Ampat. Before leaving I gave the book by Alfred Wallace to Yoram and told him about Alfred Wallace's journey to their part of the world, the folks there were very fascinated by it and quite curious of what he had to say.

That morning I got the afternoon ferry to Raja Ampat after replenishing more supplies especially Indomie noodles.

I stayed in Yengkawe Birdwatching Homestay in Waigeo. The homestay is itself quite beautiful being placed on the water in a secluded cove. The food was repetitive with fish served with a rather sweet sauce and rice. I didn't mind it except that I was used to eating more spicy stuff (that too in Indonesia!). So I gave all my Indomie noodles packets which they served me in a surprisingly unspicy way.

I decided to rest for a night and the next night I hiked up the cliff behind the homestay with the help of the homestay owner's brother, Ayub to search for Cuscus. I did spot a northern common cuscus but it was climbing up the tree and I couldn't take a picture of it. The path up the cliff was hard, but the path down was downright treacherous, especially with the pouring rain. Bird/Mammal/Snake watching be damned, I just wanted to come down without injuries. So, I slowly crawled down without any injuries, but dirtying my clothes fully. The next evening I went up the cliff to see the Waigeo Bird of Paradise. I saw **wild boars** on the way up. There were about 4 male Waigeo Birds of Paradise trying to woo a female. The dance was spectacular and it was truly one of the highlights of the trip.

The next morning at 4 am I went to see the Blue Bird of Paradise (or Wilson's BOP). The path up was very hard just like in all of Papua (which evaporated any interest of doing it again). I spotted 1 male and 2 females. Another bird that truly deserves the name 'paradise'.

That night I used Ayub's help again to spot cuscus near Saporkren village and told Ayub that no hard trekking stuff. We ended up seeing 4 **Northern Common Cuscus**. I was extremely pleased, but I had still not seen the Waigeo Cuscus. The next morning I saw many **bottlenose dolphins** from the homestay itself (at about 10 am).



Figure 6 Northern Common Cuscus

I moved to Kri Island that day. The snorkeling there blew out anything I had done previously. It was amazing! I also did spotlighting in the night and saw a **waigeo cuscus**. Although I had a good view of it, I failed to take a picture. This would be the last mammal from Papua as I didn't see any dolphins/whales in the ferry back to Sorong.

I wanted to visit the forest near Sorong (Taman Visata Alam Sorong), and arranged a night walk with the them. The night was unproductive with no mammal sightings, even though the folks there tried very hard to find something. I would definitely not recommend it, as a night walk in Singapore's mangroves or forest parks would be more successful in terms of seeing any wildlife.

I took a flight from Sorong to Manado. The folks in Manado (and northern Sulawesi) looked similar to people in Philippines, but their foods couldn't be more diametrically opposed. Manado folks like their food spicy and are mostly Christian (so they consume pork). They have their own special sambal called 'Rica' or 'Ricach'. Grilled pork/ satay pork with ricah sambal applied over it was something the locals and I loved.



Figure 7 Grilled pork with ricah sauce

One can get a grab/gojek from Manado/Bitung to Tangkoko national park, but it isn't possible to get a return journey in grab/gojek (unless you book the grab for many hours).

I stayed at Tangkoko Lodge, and can recommend it. Message the owner directly, it was cheaper than the online prices. The guides at Tangkoko are enthusiastic. I told them the first thing I wanted to see was the Sulawesi dwarf cuscus. I saw **Sulawesi bear cuscus, Sulawesi crested macaque, spectral tarsier, whitish dwarf squirrel and northern dwarf squirrel** on the same evening.



Figure 8 Sulawesi bear cuscus



Figure 9 Sulawesi crested macaque



Figure 10 spectral tarsier



Figure 11 Sulawesi dwarf cuscus

The next day I saw them all over again. In the night we tried to see if we can spot the Sulawesi dwarf cuscus, the guide made no promises, but was enthusiastic about the prospect of finding one. We did night walk outside the park and at the entrance and managed to spot the elusive creature. I got a good view and many pictures of the extremely cute **Sulawesi dwarf cuscus**. Much like in Papua I observed many bats but wasn't able to identify them. The guides were also excellent bird watchers and managed to spot many of them. The trails were like a bed of roses compared to what was there in Papua. There are quite a few convenience stores nearby so after a hot day you can always get cold drinks or even ice cream.

My trip had come to an end and I moved back to India a somewhat satisfied but definitely jobless person.

Pictures of some other wildlife I observed.





