

Trip report: North and West Sumatra

Batu Katak

After arriving at Medan Airport in the evening, we departed directly to Batu Katak. The drive at night was rather hectic, as heavy rains had caused some of the roads to be turned into small rivers in which children were swimming. But we managed to make it to our first location, the Ibu Bumi Orangutan guesthouse, safe and sound. On the way I was hoping to spot some of the nocturnal wildlife, but I did not get much further than some housecats and dogs.

Ibu Bumi Orangutan guesthouse is a basic homestay, with a western toilet, a working shower and a restaurant that serves good food. It is ideally located on the banks of a river, and from the restaurant you have a direct view on a steep hill which is part of the local forest. As a result you can spot some amazing mammal species from the restaurant alone, including wild orangutans, siamang, lar gibbon, silvery lutung, thomas langur and even sunbear have been spotted from the restaurant! One siamang even uses the electricity wire that crosses the river to come right up in the trees around the restaurant, something that occurred multiple times during our days spent here. Our stay and guided tours were arranged by Nora, a Spanish native with such a passion for animals and nature, that she decided to move to Batu Katak. Nora is working hard with the local community to protect what is left of the remaining forests around Batu Katak, for example by promoting education to the local youth about the importance of a healthy ecosystem, and why it is important to protect the local biodiversity.



We did not have any activities planned on our first day in Batu Katak, as we wanted to recover from our long travel. We did however see plenty of mammals, including **plantain**,

slender- and I think **robinsons squirrels** in the garden of the guesthouse. An afternoon walk around the palm oil plantations on the other side of the river also proved very productive. We spotted multiple groups of **pig and longtailed macaques**, as well as our first **Siamang**!

This siamang is a subadult male that can be found around the village, though he is not shy, he does not like to be approached by humans and will move off if you approach him directly. If you, however, stay patient and wait for the Siamang to come to you, you can take some great photos of this lone individual. In the evening, I was eager to try out my Nocpix thermal camera. I managed to find several species, including a civet species, loads of bats and long-tailed macaques sleeping in a tree. The most exciting thing I managed to spot however was a very large animal moving on the hillside on the opposite side of the restaurant. I could not really determine what it was, but based on the size alone and the fact that it was arboreal, it must have been either a Sunbear or an Orangutan.



The next day we woke up early for our first jungle trekking. Early morning rain however prevented us from starting our trek early. While we were waiting in the restaurant with our guide Muhlia and other guests for the rain to stop, I was constantly looking at the opposite hillside, on which I spotted the large moving object with the thermal camera the night before. After a while, the trees started moving on exactly the spot where the large heat blob disappeared the night before. A large red arm appeared and I knew that this must be our first **Orangutan**! Colombe quickly ran up to get our camera while I was looking at the Orangutan making its way up the hill through my binoculars. Photographing the animal initially proved difficult in the heavy rains and dense vegetation. But eventually, the male Orangutan sat quite open on a tree branch and we could take some lovely photos of the Orangutan, who was seemingly just as annoyed with the heavy rains as we were, in the end using his own arms to keep his head dry. This was an excellent start to our second day, we had already seen a wild Orangutan, and we did not even have to leave the restaurant! When the rain

finally calmed down we started our jungle trek into the local forest, which is connected to the Leuser ecosystem, but not a part of the national park. The trekking was overall quite difficult, mostly either climbing or descending steep hills and slippery rocks. During the trip we did not see a lot of wildlife, but we did manage to see a single **Lar gibbon with her baby** and a **Prevost's squirrel** as well as a few snakes (none of which I could identify because of the distance) and quite a few Orangutan "nests".



We took a lunch break near a bat cave, which I think would be very interesting for other mammalwatchers who are into bats. I was completely unprepared for visiting this batcave, as I was unaware that we would visit one. But I can comfortably say that the cave holds at least 10 different species of bats, including **Horsefield's fruitbat**, **Greater shortnose fruitbat**, **Fawn roundleaf bat**, and **Leschenault's rosette**. I am however no bat expert, so I could have misidentified some species. Photographing the bats proved to be quite difficult. The bats were mostly hanging on parts of the cave that had a rather low ceiling, and they would fly off when we would try to approach them, other groups that hung on a higher part of the ceiling would fly off when you would illuminate them with a flashlight. We did not want to disturb the bats too much, so we managed to only get sharp photos of a few of the species. After visiting the batcave, we spotted a group of **long-tailed macaques** on top of a hill that seemed to be extremely frightened by humans and ran off making loads of alarm calls. As the lar gibbon also fled the moment it saw us, I suspect that poaching is still quite the problem around the village of Batu Katak. We were about to end our jungle trekking when our guide spotted some movement in a tree that was pretty far away from us. At first it was unclear what was causing the branches of the tree to move, but upon further inspection a **Binturong** could be seen walking over one of the branches into another tree, to then disappear from sight. Though this was a poor sighting of only a few seconds from quite the distance, I was very excited to have seen my first binturong, a species that I had been hoping to see for a while.



After the jungle trekking, we took a swim in the river in front of the guesthouse. And I spent the evening looking towards the hill opposite to the Restaurant. In the hours before darkness I managed to spot a pair of **siamangs** on the hillside, as well as our first **Thomas Langurs**, **longtailed-macaques** and three **orangutans** making their nests for the night on the hill. These were three different **orangs** compared to the male that we spotted in the morning, with one female Orangutan with a baby and another male. As it was already getting dark and they were quite the distance away, sadly we did not manage to get any sharp photos of the spectacle, but it put us in very good spirits. In just two days in Batu Katak we managed to see 4 Orangutans, 3 Siamangs and Lar Gibbon with relative ease!



For our third day, we had a night trekking planned to look for slow loris and other wildlife. During the day we decided to go and have a look around the village plantations again from some more wildlife encounters. We did not have to go very far to spot another new species for us, 3 **Silvery lutungs** were fleeing from us about 30 meters from the entrance to the gardens of the guesthouse. We decided to stalk them and eventually we managed to sort of "pin them down" on some trees on the bank of the river. We waited for about 30-40 minutes before the lutungs started showing themselves well enough that we could photograph them. These individuals were also very scared of people, but because their movements were

limited to only a few trees on the river bank we managed to still get some nice photos. In our wait, we also managed to photograph a **black-striped squirrel** that came to check us out. When we continued our walk, we managed to spot both species of macaques, slender squirrels and the lone Siamang. Colombe and I now started joking that we would see more wildlife on our own trips around the village than we did on our trekkings.



That evening we left for our night trekking, to look for the slow loris. We departed around 9 and the goal was to walk in and around the forests that surround the local plantations for 3-4 hours. I was very excited about this nightwalk as I was eager to put my thermal imager to use. After reading all these trip reports, I believed that the thermal imager could have been an absolute game changer. During this night walk however, this was not really the case. Our guides, who used flashlights to look for wildlife, had no experience with thermal imagers, and walked at a pace that made it difficult for me to use the thermal. Our main guide, Muhlia, was also afraid of the technology, so when I offered to look through my thermal imager, he refused as he was afraid of seeing ghosts. The night trekking started slow, as we basically saw nothing except bats. After about an hour, I spotted a large heatsignal in a tree that turned out to be a sleeping **Thomas Langur**. Soon after, I spotted a large **rodent** in a tree that I did not manage to find with my flashlight for proper identification. A few minutes later something similar happened with a **civet** that was clearly visible with the thermal. At some point, we entered this large open grassy area on the edge of the jungle, surrounded by rubber plantations. Our guide told us that this was a great area to see wild porcupines. When I looked around I spotted a **cat** with my thermal, really close to the path. One of the guides however had missed it with the torch and was walking right at it. I asked him multiple times to stop and wait, but it was too late and the cat ran off before we could get our camera ready, or put the flashlight on it. I am very certain that, considering the location as well as the size of the cat, that this was probably a wild species of cat, such as a fishing cat. We were pretty far away from the village at this point, and the cat had a regular tail, something that you do not see often on Sumatra as domestic cats usually only have half a tail or just a small stump. However, due to the pace of the walk and the lack of experience of using a thermal imager with the guides, I will never know which species of cat was sitting on this open spot. The rest of the nightwalk was pretty uneventful. It started raining and despite the best efforts of our guides, we did not manage to spot any slow lorises. We did however find an Oriental Bay Owl and a sleeping **siamang**, who slept by hanging on just two fingers in a high tree above a cliff. We did not take a photo of this as we were afraid that this would wake up the Siamang and he would fall to his death, but it was very impressive to see.

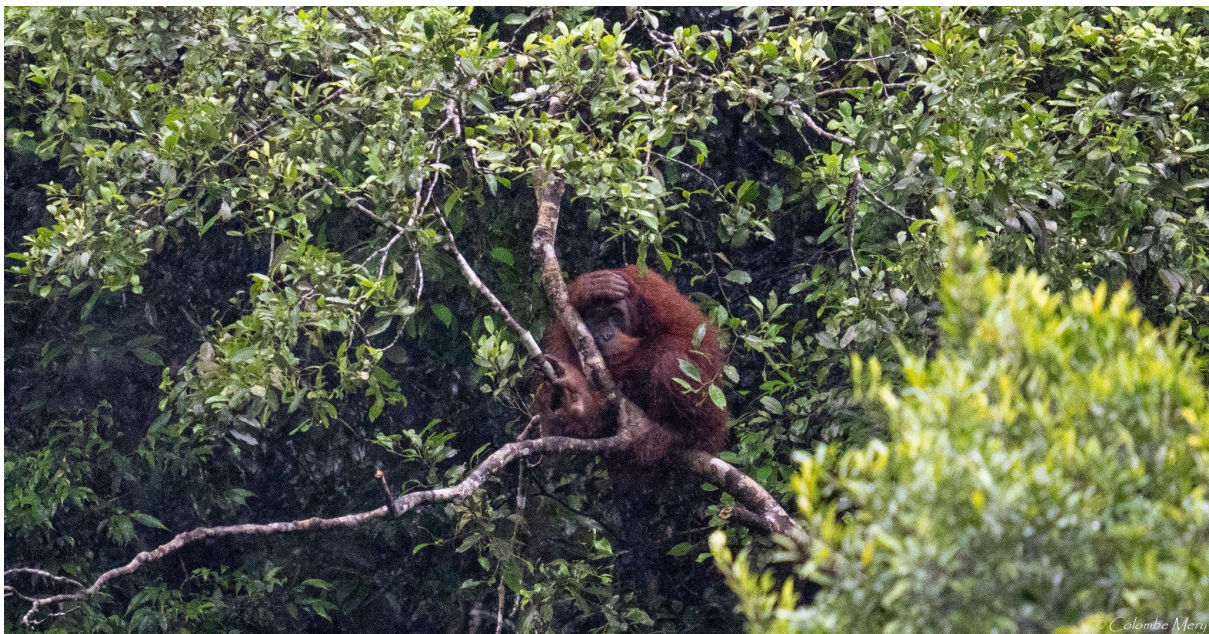
Overall impression of Batu Katak

If you are planning on visiting Batu Katak and your main goal is watching wildlife then I can confidently say that Ibu Bumi Orangutan Guesthouse should be your place of accommodation. The view on the hill on the other side of the river makes this place absolutely worthwhile. On this hill you can basically see primates everyday, with species such as long-tailed macaques being the most common, followed by Thomas Langur, siamangs, lar gibbons and even orangutans. All were seen by us on the hillside multiple times, thus allowing you to enjoy nature from the comfort of your guesthouse. Nora told us that Mouse-deer can occasionally be seen in the garden, as well as multiple species of squirrels and a civet (which we heard but never saw).

Though our guides were great guys and really made sure that we would have a good time, they are not really wildlife guides. With that I mean that they are mainly trained to look for orangutans, they will know the names of some other common species but they do not possess in-depth knowledge of all the species in the jungle. For example, our guide identified the Binturong as a giant squirrel, could not identify any of the squirrel species and he could not name any of the bat species in the cave, despite telling me that he takes most of the tourists there. They also do not carry binoculars, so if you are planning on visiting and

you have an old pair laying around catching dust it would be a great gift. That being said, they are working hard to make sure that you can see many species on your trekkings, make sure that you are safe on the sometimes difficult walks, joke around and overall make sure that you have a pleasant jungle experience.

Though our guides denied it, it is very obvious that poaching still occurs around the forests in Batu Katak. We encountered people with guns in the plantations around the forests twice. Animals are extremely shy and afraid of people, and you barely hear or see any birds. Basically the only birds you see are brown in color. During our day jungle trekking, we could also hear the sound of trees being felled by a chainsaw, and we were told that an illegal goldmine had set-up shop upstream in the river. Nora told us that hunting for wild pig is still legal in the forests, and that despite the local forests being community owned, it decreases slightly in size every year. This being said, I do think that Batu Katak has tremendous potential for ecotourism, and that it can be an excellent alternative to Bukit Lawang for people that want to see truly wild orangutans as well as the other primate species.



Travels with SUMECO

From Batu Katak we took the car for about one hour to the village of Bukit Lawang to meet up with Bobi Handoko from the SUMECO wildlife conservation organisation. Bobi Handoko started SUMECO in 2012 to help protect the local nature and wildlife. He helps to educate the local communities about the importance of having healthy ecosystems, fights wildlife crime through on the ground investigations, and rescues animals, including elusive species such as Asian golden cats from poachers, and re-introduced them back into the wild. Bobi and his team fund all their activities through responsible ecotourism in the region. When we stumbled upon the SUMECO project online before our travels we got very excited, so we decided to book all the activities that this organization has to offer to support their work. Bobi himself is a very passionate man that works day and night to do as much as he can for the local wildlife. His teams consist of people that have a similar passion for wildlife, and many of

the guides that now work for his organisation are former poachers, with excellent knowledge of the jungle and its inhabitants.

Halaban elephant watching

We started our adventure with SUMECO by looking for wild Sumatran elephants. The world's rarest subspecies of elephant. Though we had seen Asian elephants before, we liked the idea of tracking down wild elephants on foot in the jungle and we really wanted to support the efforts of Bobi to help protect the remaining wild elephants of the Leuser Ecosystem. In the early morning we got picked up by our guide Roy, who took us to a remote palmoil plantation on the edge of the Leuser Ecosystem on the back of a motorbike. After a bumpy ride of about 2,5 hours on the back of the motorbikes, we arrived at a palmoil plantation which has been returned to nature. Apparently elephants always roamed this area, so when the area got converted into a plantation, the elephants kept coming back and walked through the plantation. From our understanding the palmoil plantation was given back to nature by the owners and is no longer in use as a true plantation. From the looks of it, the plantation was largely inaccessible and overgrown, with small patches of old and young forest throughout the plantation. Upon arrival, we were told by our guide and a local that finding the elephants today would be difficult, as they had moved off a few days earlier. Seeing an elephant today would not be guaranteed, or easy. We were however eager to try and after walking for about half an hour, we found a fresh elephant trail. Following this trail was difficult as it often went through steep and really muddy terrain, crossing rivers and dense jungle patches in the process. On the way we spotted a group of **Thomas langurs**, as well as **long-tailed macaques** and a **black giant squirrel**. As we followed the elephants tracks, there was reason for excitement. Our guide told us that the tracks we were literally walking in were probably made within the last half hour. Occasionally the guides would make us wait and they would go ahead in the small patches of dense forest, to make sure we would not accidentally encounter the elephants and create a dangerous situation. After about 2 hours of searching, one of the guides managed to spot a wild bull **Sumatran elephant**. It was only about 30 meters away from us, but it was incredibly difficult to see through the dense vegetation. Fortunately the elephant moved to a slightly more open area, after which it decided to take a mud bath in a small mudpool. Now that the elephant was laying down, the guide felt comfortable to let us approach the elephant quite closely, to about 20-25 meters, from which we managed to get some pictures of the head while standing on a dead tree. This was exciting, especially since at some point the bull smelled us and trumpeted some loud noises to let us know that he was aware of our presence.



After a few minutes, the guide decided that it was better for the elephant and for us if we would retreat and let the elephant be for a while. We decided to have lunch on a small hill right above the place where the elephant was having a mudbath. We were sitting on the elephant trail while having lunch, as this was the only place where the vegetation was short enough to make the ground accessible, when suddenly the elephant came walking in our direction. The elephant stopped and looked at us from about 60-70 meters away, stood there for a while, unsure what to make of the situation, and then decided to head the other way. It was at this moment that a second elephant appeared right next to the first! One that we had completely missed up till now and must have been really close to us as we were photographing the other elephant taking the mudbath. It really shows how even an animal as big as an elephant can completely disappear in the thickness of the jungle. We managed to get some more photos of the elephants during this amazing encounter and were extremely satisfied with the fact that we had managed to see wild Sumatran elephants on foot in the jungle. An absolutely amazing experience.

After lunch we decided to track the elephants down one more time, but it was now the warmest of the day and the uphill tracking in the open landscape was absolutely exhausting. We managed to find them again, this time on the top of a hill, but while the elephants were well covered by the vegetation for shade, we were not and were suffering from the intense heat of the midday sun, so we decided to call it a day and return back. The way back in the sun proved to be extremely difficult. We both carried about 2 liters of water on us for the entire trip and had drunk about a liter before we started this trip, thinking that three liters per person would be enough, but we both ran out of water before we started the way back and were soon regretting not bringing more water on this trip. On the way back we saw a **large threeshrew**, running over a dead tree trunk on the ground, before disappearing in a palm tree. Overall, we were extremely satisfied with our elephant trip and I have to say that the

thrill of seeing elephants on foot is a completely different experience from watching elephants from the safety of a vehicle.



Tualang Gepang

Tualang Gepang is a relatively new jungle trekking area that recently opened up about 45 minutes away by car from the village of Bukit Lawang. The area still holds some of Sumatra's iconic wildlife species, such as sunbear, sumatran serow, sumatran tigers and clouded leopard. Right before our arrival, a wildlife camera of SUMECO actually filmed a Sumatran tigress with 4 cubs in the area! Though you generally see less wildlife in the area of Tualang Gepang in comparison to doing a jungle trek in the crowded forests of Bukit

Lawang. Before my travels I had extensive contact with Bobi about the species that I would like to see, and he told me that my biggest chances of seeing some rare Sumatran mammals would be by doing a five day jungle trek in Tualang Gepang. To maximize our chances, Bobi had a former poacher (Eddy), who knew the area well, track down a sunbear for us in the days before our arrival. I really would like to see a wild sun bear so I really appreciated this effort by SUMECO.

On the morning of the 20th of May we were picked up by our jungle trekking guides, Putra, a former poacher of argus pheasants, who since has turned conservationists and now loved re-introducing mammals back into the wild, especially Slow Loris, and Eddy a former hornbill and tiger poacher in Tualang Gepang, who was now working as a guide and animal tracker for Sumeco. We started our jungle trekking by getting out of our car in the middle of nowhere on the road, and after trekking through some palm plantations, we entered the raw jungle of Tualang Gepang. From the get go, this jungle trekking was extremely difficult: You are basically walking steep uphill over slippery terrain, or you descend downhill on the same slippery terrain, after which you cross a river and repeat the same process. Putra told us that the inaccessibility of the terrain was the reason that Tualang Gepang was not converted into a palm plantation, the terrain is simply unsuitable to grow palm oil. There are also no trails, we just followed our guide Eddy through the jungle on his old hunting knowledge from the area. Eddy seemed to know exactly where we needed to go, and the routes were easy for him, occasionally even going barefoot through the jungle.

After about an 2 hours we arrived on the top of a hill, Eddy pointed at some bumps in the leaves on the ground and said that these were sunbear tracks, Though I was not entirely convinced, we followed the tracks and soon enough we arrived at an area where a lot of trees had sunbear pawmarks on them, including some that were so fresh that the tree was still "bleeding". This got me really excited, and Putra told us that our camp was about 1.5 hours from this location, and that we would return at night and try to spot the sunbear with my thermal imager and flashlights. When we moved on, Eddy spotted another damaged tree, this time with distinctly different markings, the markings of a clouded leopard that descended from the tree! This got me even more excited for our nightly exploring. After a little longer we arrived at our first camp, which consisted of tents made out of plastic near a river, a jungle toilet and basic plastic mats to sit on. The camps do not have sleeping bags or mattresses. Fortunately, after hearing the mammalwatching podcast we were prepared that this might happen and brought our own mattresses and sleeping bags. Which I highly recommend if you are trekking in Tualang Gepang. In the camp there was also a cook and carrier, who made sure that you felt right at home in the camp, with fresh fruits, tea and coffee and very extensive jungle dinners!



After arriving in the camp the only thing on my mind was returning to the sunbear spot and I got everything ready for that evening, but the weather had other plans. Heavy rains started showering down at the end of the afternoon and continued well into the night. This made the journey to the location of the sunbear tracks unsafe, as we would have to cross a river and would have to climb a muddy hill to reach the destination. I was very disappointed by this, especially when I found out the next day that we were moving deeper into the jungle to another camp and that we would not return to the sunbear spot. Putra however told us of a watering hole near the second camp, that is frequently used by Sumatran serow and other wildlife, and I figured that if we would move deeper into the jungle our chances of unique wildlife would increase.

On both our first and second trekking day, we saw little to no wildlife at all. In two days, we caught a glimpse of two **lar gibbon families**, one group of **Thomas langurs** and some **longtailed macaques**. We saw no birds or squirrels and the jungle was generally quiet. Though we did not find the animals, the animals did find us, as there were loads of mosquitoes, leeches, ants and bees in the area that could make your day miserable. After almost a full day's walk we arrived at our second camp, which Putra jokingly, but accurately described as the "leech hotel". The area around the camp was filled with large rocks, and Eddy showed us several places where Sumatran serows can be seen. We unfortunately did not find any, but we did find fresh tracks from the same day scattered across a large area.

Most of these led to a watering hole that is about 10 minutes away from the basecamp. Though the term watering hole is not entirely correct, it is a place where the river widens and is shallow. Eddy told us that serows, tigers and boar come to this place to drink, something that got backed up by the evidence of loads of old and recent animal tracks in the mud. Our plan for the evening was to return to the watering hole right before dawn, hide and wait until the night and try to see with the thermal imager what animals come by, have flashlights and a camera ready and when a serow would appear, get the camera ready, turn on the flashlight and make a photo of the animal.



In practice this plan was poorly executed. For reasons that were unclear to me, we had a very late dinner by the time it was already dark. This caused us to have to walk to the watering hole in the complete darkness, making a lot more noise and disturbance than if we would have done it in daylight. And instead of it just being us and one of the guides, we went with the full squad, everyone was eager to see something. Understandable, but now there were 6 people hiding behind some small rocks looking at the pool. I was very skeptical that any animal would show up that night. I figured that most animals could smell us from a mile

away, but actually shortly after our arrival a group of presumably **Asian small clawed otters** showed up. I am not entirely sure of the species as I only managed to spot them with the thermal imager, but there were 4 of them. We decided to not disturb the environment with the flashlight for a photo, since we were waiting for the elusive serows. But besides the otters, and some species of **flying squirrels and bats**, no other species of mammals showed up at the lake. I was a bit disappointed by the logistics of this evening, and I think that if everything would have gone the way I imagined it, us arriving about 2 hours earlier and it only being three people instead of six, we would have had a significantly better chance of seeing a serow. Though one could question if the serows would have showed up at all, as the tracks leading to the watering hole could not have been more than 24 hours old with the heavy rainfall from the night earlier. I also think that this is an ideal place for SUMECO to build an animal watching shelter, as now you are still sitting considerably open behind some rocks.



On our third day of jungle trekking, we did not see any wildlife. This made us reconsider our original plan of doing a five day jungle trekking in Tualang Gepang. We came to this part of Sumatra to see and photograph wildlife, and after three days we had not photographed a single species. I was not expecting to come into this area and photograph tigers and sunbears, but I was expecting some wildlife such as primates, squirrels and birds to keep us entertained along the way, with the sunbear being a potential wildcard. This combined with the difficulty of the trekking, the leeches, mosquitoes and occasional antbites and beestings, made us decide to cut short our jungle trekking by one day, and instead spent two more days trekking in Bukit Lawang. Our fourth day was thus spent largely returning to the main road, but not before visiting a batcave that was near the camp. This batcave was quite difficult to reach, but after going through a narrow entrance, you enter into a big cave with several large "rooms". The cave was absolutely filled with bats and the floor was covered with guano, which was in turn filled with all sorts of insects that would make the mass of guano move when you would walk on it. Again, I saw loads of different bat species from

small to big, from insectivorous to fruit bats, but I could not really identify any species. I took a few photos to get an impression of the cave, and I think this cave has mammalwatching potential for bat-enthusiasts. But because the bats would constantly fly up when we try to photograph them, accidentally colliding with us as they would fly away, we decided that it was better for the animals if we would not put the flashlight on them for too long. Upon leaving the cave, Putra spotted an enormous spider on the walls of the cave. It was about the size of a small dinner plate if you would include the legs. I recognized the spider to be in the Heteropoda family, but although this was by far the biggest spider that I have seen in my life, I did not think too much of it. Later in the hotel, I would find out that Sumatra does not have any spiders that come even close to that size that are known to science, and that remote caves like this are common places for new unique Heteropoda species to be discovered. The species that we saw that day was thus maybe a new species of Heteropoda to science.



Overall impressions of Tualang Gepang

In four days of trekking through Tualang Gepang, we saw a few families of gibbons, saw one group of Thomas langur and spotted some Longtailed-macaques. With the thermal imager, I managed to spot some otters, flying squirrels and one very large mammal at the camp on day three near the river, which we did not manage to find when we moved down to the river

with our flashlights. We saw no squirrels, very little birdlife (a few very shy kingfishers and some other birds here and there) and a few lizards. We did however find tracks of sunbear, serow, wild boar and clouded leopards. We also walked past several recent orangutan "nests" indicating that they are still in the area. Though we saw very little wildlife, the jungle of Tualang Gepang itself is spectacular with beautiful scenery, diverse landscapes, beautiful "broken mountains" of rock, waterfalls and lovely rivers and streams to take a dive in during your trekkings. During our 4 day trekking, we only encountered other people once, and you constantly have the feeling that it is just you and your guide somewhere remotely in the jungle. Overall, the area just gives off the vibe of enormous wildlife potential, but that it unfortunately still needs to recover from the poaching that occurred in the area in the years before it opened up for wildlife tourism.

The trekking itself is well arranged by SUMECO, and our guides Putra and Eddy as well as the cook and carrier in the camp, made sure that you feel safe and relatively comfortable during your entire stay. In general there is a good vibe during the trekking, with lots of jokes and smiles and in the camps you can decide to play cardgames to kill some time and get to know each other, or go fishing in the streams to then later eat the caught fish for dinner. The prepared meals are very tasty, and everyday you get fruits and a lunch of nasi in the jungle. The dinners are more diverse, and there is usually a whole range of dishes to choose from. The only thing that we found strange was the fact that we often suggested to start the trekking early mornings, to maximize our chances of seeing wildlife, but that we were consistently being told that this was pointless as the wildlife would be just as active around 11 in the morning as it would be at 7 in the morning. Something that I found hard to believe, and we were under the impression that the guides just preferred sleeping in. That being said, we were often tired at the end of a day of trekking and could also really use a good night's sleep.

Bukit Lawang

Many trip reports have already extensively covered Bukit Lawang, so I will not go in too much detail. We spent 2 days and one night in the jungle of Bukit Lawang with SUMECO. For this trip we also had Eddy and Putra as our guides. The advantage of this was, that after Tualang Gepang, they felt very comfortable to take us onto some of the small and more difficult trails in Bukit Lawang, which minimized our encounters with other tourists. On these trails we managed to see **Thomas langurs**, several families of **lar gibbons** including one family that was foraging in a fig tree and would let us approach relatively close for photography, as well as both species of **macaques** that can be found here. It took us about 2 hours to find our first "domesticated" **orangutans**, which were surrounded by about 50 other tourists. Moments later we would encounter more Orangutans surrounded by such a large group of people that we decided not to visit. Putra had received a tip from another guide about a **large male orangutan**, that apparently was still truly wild, and had not been seen in the area for months but had recently returned. We went to the place where this ape was last seen and managed to find it about half an hour away from this location downhill from where we were standing. Though the male was initially difficult to see, he was making his way up the hill and soon became clearly visible. As a storm in November had destroyed most of the trees on top of the hill, we figured that the Orangutan would have to come down and close to the ground, which he eventually did. He was absolutely massive and beautiful to see. Though we were initially the only ones on this location, other guides and tourists soon came to see the Orangutan and eventually about 20 tourists were having the same

encounter as we did. As the Orangutan was crossing a relatively steep hill in a more remote part of Bukit Lawang, the amount of other tourists fortunately stayed limited. We watched as this impressive specimen crossed the hill right in front of us, as close as 10 meters, before he disappeared down the steep hill, where no tourist could follow.



That evening we stayed in a busy jungle camp with several other groups of tourists. Compared to Tualang Gepang, this camp was luxurious, with mattresses and even blankets. The original plan was to do a night walk and look for the slow loris, our guides however, did not seem too enthusiastic about this idea and decided that we should walk through the stream/river in front of the camp to look for wildlife. According to us this was a stupid idea, as we did not feel comfortable carrying expensive cameras and a thermal imager while wading through a river with slippery rocks. Though we had some initial success with a **small-toothed Palm civet** in the tree near our camp, I slipped soon after and fell into the river. At the moment I fortunately had my electronic devices in a waterproof bag, but this did not give me much confidence to take them out and start looking around. In the end this night-walk lasted for about half an hour and to us felt like a bit of a disappointment due to the lack of effort that was put in by our guides. The next day we managed to see more **orangutans, lar gibbons, squirrels and Thomas langurs**, as well as a pair of **siamangs**. We would eventually leave the jungle by rafting, which was a really fun experience.



The mangrove tour in Langkat

After our stay in Bukit Lawang, we had booked a boat tour with SUMECO in a mangrove forest north of Medan. This mangrove forest is not part of a protected area, and the sole reason it has not been converted into palm plantations yet is because of the resistance of the local population. One of these locals is named Andy, and he wants to try and protect these mangroves by starting an ecotourism business. He got into contact with Bobi and they decided to work together to make this happen. I got drawn into doing a mangrove trip, as there was a chance not to see a mammal, but a rare and elusive reptile, one that we know little about, especially on Sumatra: the **False gharial**. Mangroves are not really a typical

habitat for false gharials, but the peatswamps upstream had been converted into palmoil and thus the animals were forced downstream. Other animals that could be seen on this boat trip to the mangroves were apparently Irrawaddy dolphins, as well as loads of unique bird species.

The arrangement of the mangrove tour had a rough start, I had done mangrove tours before and it is common to do an evening and a morning boat ride to look for the wildlife. Andy however was off the impression that we could only do one evening tour or a morning tour, but not both. It would take 6 hours from Bukit Lawang to get to his remote location in the mangroves, and for the price we paid, I thought that was fair to stay at least one night and do an evening and morning safari, as is the more common practice. For this journey Bobi arranged an excellent driver for us, who spoke proper English and would tell us a lot about the environment and join us on the boatsafaris. He would do the communication for us during our stay in and around the mangroves and made sure that we were comfortable. Before our departure, Bobi had warned us that the facilities on location were not yet ready to receive tourists and would be basic. Indeed, upon arrival you could tell that they were not used to receiving tourists in the area, something that got confirmed by our driver. But the accommodation was decent enough to receive tourists, with a proper mattress, western toilet and a shower. Shortly after arrival we found out why Andy was not eager to take us out both in the evening and in the morning. That night and morning was Eid Ul Adha, an important holiday for muslims like Andy, something that he did not take into account when he accepted our booking.

After dinner we started our trip into the mangroves on a large wooden boat with a noisy engine. The mangroves were absolutely filled with birds of all kinds, including kingfishers, drongos and pigeons and several species of egrettes, heron and bittern. But pretty soon we encountered a group of **silvery lutungs**, followed by another group, and then another! This place was absolutely filled with silvery lutungs. We did not really try to take any photos as we already had some good shots of the species, but if you want to go and photograph silvery lutungs this might be the best place. In the evening we also saw several groups of **longtailed macaques** and a roosting tree of **large flying foxes**. I really wanted to go to this roosting tree with the boat, as we could only see it from quite the distance. At first Andy (who only spoke very basic English), told us that approaching the tree was not possible, then he told us that he knew a way that would lead us there, but it would take 30 minutes asking if we wanted to go. And then when we went, he told us after about 20 minutes that we would not arrive before dark, and that by then all the large flying foxes would have flown off. Something that he did not mention before. Indeed, for the rest of the night we would see these enormous flying foxes fly around the boat, such an impressive sight!

The rest of the night we used flashlights to look for the false gharial or saltwater crocodiles, waiting for the eyeshine to give them away. With the thermal imager I managed to find multiple groups of **wild boar**. At some point I managed to find a mammal that seemed bigger than a wild boar with my thermal, in an area that was more forest than mangrove more upstream in the river. When I put my flashlight on it, it had already started to disappear in the vegetation, but it moved very atypically for a boar and my first instinct told me that this was a **Malayan tapir**, especially because of the headshape. I do not however count this a Malayan tapir sighting, for all I know this could have been cattle or a large wild boar. I would later

show Andy a photo of a Malayan tapir with the question of whether these animals were around and he confirmed that they were indeed still in the area.

We searched till late in the evening for the false gharials, when eventually the guides just sort of gave up and it was just me searching with the flashlight. We were making our way back up the river when I spotted the characteristic eyeshine of a crocodile behind a small island in a large creek. After looking with the binoculars I could confirm that this was indeed a **false gharial**! We tried to approach it with the boat, but it kept diving under before we could go anywhere near the croc. To make matters worse, it started to become very foggy, with some light drizzle, making it even more difficult to find the crocodile. Eventually we managed to take a few crappy photos which showed the head clearly, but I really hoped that we would have been able to get closer to the animal and take some proper photos as the photos that we took do not really depict a false gharial clearly. We told Andy that we would like to return to the same area the next morning, to try and take photos of the individual the next day. Though we were initially on the way back, the crew now had renewed hope and turned the boat around. We would search for another hour, spotting another **false gharial** diving under near the boat before we could take a photo. In the end this boat tour lasted about 7 hours and we arrived back around 12 o'clock at night. Though we were absolutely exhausted from the journey, we could not sleep because the mosque standing right next to the unfinished ecotourism lodge was celebrating Eid Ul Adha till deep in the night.



The next morning the alarm went off at 4:45 and after a very short and poor night of sleep, we would be back on the boat looking for wildlife by 5am. This was Andy's idea, as he wanted to be back to celebrate Eid Ul Adha by 9. It was now low tide and you could spot many different species of rodents on the mudflats, all fleeing away from the light of our torches before I could identify them. I expected us to go back to the place further upstream where we spotted the false gharial just the evening before, but instead we went downstream and took a completely different route, even after communicating that we wanted to go back to this location. Andy had asked us the night before what we wanted to do the next morning and we had told him that we wanted to look for the crocodile and do some sunrise birdwatching. Now however he took us with the boat on to the open sea. Initially I thought that this was probably to look for dolphins, but soon he stopped the engine and we were just laying still.

We asked what was happening but did not get an answer as it slowly started to become light again. After about half an hour, Andy communicated to me that he was sorry, but that this was not a good morning to see the sunrise, because it was too cloudy. It started to sink in for us, that we had a miscommunication with Andy, and that when we had asked for sunrise birdwatching, he had probably understood sunrise watching. After explaining the miscommunication, Andy asked what we wanted to do for the rest of the morning, since we thought that we had limited time. I asked if we could go upstream to look for the crocodile from the night before. We did, but by the time we arrived there many more boats had passed, and the croc was nowhere to be found. The rest of the morning became very strange, Andy took us deep into the mangroves for way longer than he had originally said and we had anticipated, to eventually bring us to a massive egret and bittern colony in the mangroves. On our way we probably spotted about 300 **Silvery lutungs**, which seemed to be present on every small mangrove island in the river, a group of probably **small clawed otters** and one lone otter that was crossing a creek, most likely a **smooth coated otter**. Though the bird colony was extremely spectacular, with the skies being absolutely filled with birds, we could not really enjoy it that much. By now it was already around 11 and we had been sitting on the boat in the scorching sun with no shade and with no water or food after a night with very little sleep. As we anticipated on a tour that only lasted till 9, we did not take any sunscreen, very little water and no food. We eventually made it back only around 12:30 feeling quite exhausted from the long and nice but intense boat safari.

Overall impressions of the mangrove tour

Though we liked the SUMECO mangrove tour, the whole organisation of it was very poorly executed and it did not feel like ecotourism. Upon arrival, we were told to wait in the car, while Andy and his crew first had to remove some freshly caught birds in cages from our sleeping quarters. Bobi had already explained to us that as long as ecotourism does not bring in enough money for the community, some hunting or "poaching" still has to take place. This however felt a bit like greenwashing to us, you are either an ecotourism destination and you try to protect your local wildlife and ecosystems, or you are not and keep on hunting, but then do not call it ecotourism. This felt very much like having it both ways. The creeks and rivers of the mangrove forests were also facing extreme levels of overexploitation, there were fishing nets placed basically everywhere on levels that cannot be sustainable for the ecosystem. Andy told us multiple times that he wanted to save the mangrove forests from being converted into palmoil. Because they were vital for local communities' livelihoods, through fishing and hunting. He wanted to create an additional

income stream through ecotourism to protect the area. Though I believe Andy's intentions are pure, he does not really seem to understand the concept of ecotourism. In my opinion, you also have to protect the ecosystem from (over)exploitation in order to become an ecotourism destination. This last criteria was clearly not met. Finally, we had the impression that they had no idea how ecotourism worked. Normally when you visit an area you go to look for a flagship species, like the orangutan in Bukit Lawang and highlight other species that can be found in the area to draw tourists in. Andy seemed to have no idea why tourists would want to come and visit the mangrove forests. Even asking me the question directly. And even after telling him what we would like to see (crocs, dolphins, birds), we still seemed to just take random routes to the mangroves, not stopping when the opportunity arose to photograph unique species.

That being said, this is the place on our trip where we easily saw the highest biomass and diversity of wildlife. And if Andy and their crew would be able to set-up a proper ecotourism business, revolving around seeing the crocodile species, the bird colony and the otter and primate species, I think this area has huge potential to become an ecotourism destination. For this to happen they do have to think longterm about the future of this fragile ecosystem, by closing areas for fishing and hunting and by protecting the crocodiles better. We were told that all the crocodiles around are adults, which is an indication that the populations are probably too small and fragmented to still have reproduction. And although the amount of birds we saw was spectacular, the only rare species that we saw were removed out of our sight upon arrival in cages, an indication that work still needs to be done for the protection of these species.

Pulau Weh

After our visit to the Mangroves we took the long car drive North to Banda Atjeh, to take the ferry to the island of Pulau Weh. I could find absolutely no information on the mammals that can be found on the island, though it still has large primary forests on the Northern edges. During our stay we mainly relaxed and snorkeled and did a dolphin boat trip, on which we saw a large group of **spinner dolphins** up close. During our stay we also saw **island flying foxes** as well as **large flying foxes** and some **long and pigtailed macaques**. I asked many locals about the mammals that could be found on the island but I only gained very little information. Apparently there are no species of wild cats on the island, but civets do occur. The island used to have a population of deer (unclear which species) but they were hunted to extinction in recent years. The biggest mammal that could now be found on the island was wild boar. During our one week stay, I did not see a single squirrel anywhere.



Andalas University forest

From Banda Atjeh we flew to Padang. Originally, we had a comfortable direct flight in the afternoon, but this got changed by the airline to a flight at 7am to Jakarta, followed by a three hour layover before arriving in Padang late afternoon. What was originally planned as a relaxed day before our jungle adventures would continue, thus turned into an early rise and long travel day. In Padang we met up with Imam Taufiqurrahman from SwaraOwa, and a fellow mammalwatcher active on this website. Our goal was to look for agile gibbons and other wildlife around Padang. This however had not really been done before, so Imam relied on the information of locals in the area such as Dr. Rizaldi from Andalas University and previous sightings of the gibbons around the area of Lembah Anai by Wawan from SwaraOwa. We had three days to look for the Agile gibbons, and in the end it was decided to look for them in two different locations: Andalas University Forest and Lembah Anai.

That night we were invited by professor Rizaldi and Imam for dinner. Dr. Rizaldi is a primatologist who works among other things, on the conservation of primates on mainland Sumatra and the Mentawai islands. He was very excited about receiving tourists that would come all this way to look for the agile gibbons, something that had not happened before, and he told us about the wildlife in the area. Though he could not join us the next day for our search for the gibbons in the Andalas University Forest, he had arranged a Msc student by the name of Jefrial to show us the way.

Jefrial proved to be an expert in the field, who knew almost every animal including insects and fish, by scientific name. He lived in a house on the edge of the university forest, together with some other students and spent a lot of his free time looking and identifying the different species that could be found in the forest.

The next morning Imam picked us up at 6:30 at our hotel and we headed to the university campus for our search for the gibbons. At the entrance of the university forest we were greeted by Jefrial and we quickly headed into the forest. The Andalas University forest is located on the edges of the university campus, naturally forming the eastern and northern edges of the campus. The university's forest is directly connected to the much larger primary forests of the Kerinci National park, Sumatra's largest national park. Wildlife can thus freely move between the university campus and the national park. Jefrial brought us to a higher viewpoint in the forest where gibbons could usually be seen. This day however there were no gibbons around, but as the sun appeared from behind the clouds, we could hear several families of gibbons singing at a distance. Considering the distance of the calls, we knew that we had no chance of finding these gibbons before they would fall silent. We thus started a walk in the forest to see what species we would encounter. Colombe unfortunately fell ill, and stayed behind for this walk.

The university forest has several trails with diverse levels of steepness, though walking through the jungle was not really difficult compared to Tualang Gepang. The forests consist of diverse forest landscapes, from dense dark vegetation to relatively open grassy areas and from muddy flat zones to rocky terrain. On this first day we did not see much wildlife, though Imam proved to be an excellent wildlife guide. He recognized a lot of birds by song and managed to spot quite a few of them before I did, something that does not happen often to me. On this first day we stayed in the jungle for about 5 hours, but sadly the only mammal we saw were some **longtailed macaques**, who were incredibly shy. Imam and I also noticed that there were basically no birds, after which Jefrial told us that sadly poaching still occurred in the forest, and that some of the poaching was ironically being done by the campus security guards, or family members of them. Imam and I were a bit surprised by this news, as this could also have a potential influence on the results of the scientific studies that are executed in the forest.

The next morning Imam picked us up at 5:30 at our hotel, to go back to the forest. Jefrial had told us the day earlier that the agile Gibbons usually sing before sunrise, and that starting the walk around 7 like we did the day before decreases our chances of seeing gibbons. We thus started walking at 6. I think we had walked for about 45 minutes on the trail, and we were in the process of photographing a scarlet-rumped trogon. When we heard the song of a family of gibbons. We left our bags behind and quickly followed the trail in the direction of the sound. As we got closer to the location, the jungle became very dense and I was under the impression that we would not see the gibbons, so instead I started recording their sounds to at least have a bit of proof that we had gotten close. We went off trail, climbing a small vegetated hill. I managed to spot some movement in a tree in the direction where the gibbon calls were coming from. But unfortunately this proved to be a group of **longtailed macaques**. Soon after however Imam and I spotted an **Agile gibbon** moving away from us.

Colombe was not happy as she thought that she had missed the only opportunity to see an agile gibbon, but Imam managed to find them again in a tall tree about 70 meters away from us. Indeed a family of **agile gibbons** could be seen, with one individual sitting relatively open, they continued their morning song for a while as Colombe tried her best to work with the limited light and long distance to take some photos of the gibbons. After about 5 minutes the gibbons moved off. But we were all very happy, as neither of us had ever seen an agile gibbon before and we had now seen our target species. We continued walking the trail that

day, but besides some **long and pigtailed Macaques** and a **black-striped squirrel** we did not see any more interesting mammal species.



That afternoon we visited a local batcave on the property of a cement factory. Our driver tipped us about this place and Imam and I were curious to check it out. Upon arrival it appeared very touristy, and once we entered the cave, we realized that it was now no longer really suitable for bats as large parts of the cave were illuminated with artificial light. Though there were still a few bats around, we managed to photograph only one species that I identified as an **Intermediate roundleaf bat** (but I could be wrong). This place could in my opinion no longer really be called a bat cave, as the primary requirement for it to be a batcave (darkness and minimum disturbance) were no longer met.



That evening we returned to the campus, to look for the slow loris, which by now had become my nemesis mammal, as so far I had only ever managed to find a bengal slow loris in Cambodia, but this individual was very far away and could not be seen very clearly. I missed out on Slow Loris in India and Vietnam. On Sumatra I was under the impression that seeing a Slow loris should be easy, as most people that we talked to that did nightwalks saw one, or even multiple. Yet we were 0/2 on our nightwalks and I did not manage to find any by myself using my thermal despite looking several evenings for them. Jefrial had told us that slow lorisses were not uncommon around campus, and he had several videos and photos to prove it. He also told us that porcupines, boar and even a sunbear would occasionally be seen on the university campus grounds. As we had seen some sunbear tracks on the edge of the campus in the forest, I did not find this difficult to believe. For several hours we walked on some of the roads on the campus. Our chosen route was excellent for a night tour, as it was a mix of forested areas and more open areas with only low vegetation and some bushes. That night we managed to spot 7 different **Asian palm civets** and I managed to find a group of **longtailed macaques** with my thermal. But though we all put in our best efforts, we did not find a slow loris or any other interesting mammal species. The loris evaded us again. That evening we said goodbye to Jefrial and thanked him for assisting us on this journey. The next morning we would head to Lembah Anai.



Lembah Anai

Lembah Anai is a mountainous area north of the city of Padang, with cliffs and very steep hills that is connected to Kerinci NP. Like in other places on Sumatra, the inaccessibility of the area formed a natural protector of the wildlife. A road that ironically connects Padang to another city called Padang goes through the area, following a steep river valley. Going to Lembah Anai was a bit of a risk, as the recent floods of November 2025 had damaged the road badly, and Dr. Rizaldi did not expect us to find much wildlife in the area after the flooding. But Imam and I were eager to try it out anyway to see what was out there. Colombe was unfortunately still not feeling too well and did not join that day. We headed out early (after a very short night) and drove the road through the area, looking for places where we could leave the car and could relatively easily get into the jungle. We stopped the car multiple times to see if we could head out and into the forest, but we could not find any trails. Our driver Anton, a local from Padang, had told Imam about a small hiking trail in Lembah Anai that would lead to a waterfall and soon we arrived at this location. Ironically the hiking trail had opening hours, and as we waited for the trail to open we kind of looked around the area. It was cloudy that morning, but when the sun appeared we could hear a group of **agile gibbons** sing on the hill opposite to us. Initially I could not find them with my binoculars, but then I remembered that I had the thermal on me and I quickly found an **agile gibbon** in a tree a good 250 meters (if not more) away from us with the thermal. After that I managed to find it with the binoculars as well, but it moved out of sight rather quickly. This observation was soon followed by four Wreathed hornbills that Imam spotted flying over the river valley.



At 08:00 the path to the waterfall was officially opened, but nobody appeared in the ticket office, so after a few minutes, Imam and I headed up the trail without a ticket. It was a well maintained trail that was easy to climb. We did not have to go far on the trail to encounter a group of **Sumatran surili**, which were sitting really close to the trail and rather close to the ground. It was a new species for both of us and they seemed to be quite habituated to humans, as they were not shy and only slowly backed off. This put us in good spirits for the rest of the walk. Shortly after we spotted a group of **longtailed macaques** that was also habituated to humans followed by another group of **surili**, this time further away. We followed the trail and eventually ended up at a relatively open space in the jungle, with a third group of **surili**. As this was the end of the trail, we stayed in the area for quite a while, both trying to photograph the surilis in the trees above us. In the area we also managed to see at least 4 different species of squirrels. Though I have difficulties identifying the squirrels, I think we saw **black-striped squirrel** (easy to identify), **Robinson's squirrel**, **Sumatran mountain squirrel** and a squirrel that neither Imam nor I could identify. It was moving over the ground, crossed a river in front of us and then disappeared. Its ventral side was orange/red but the upper side of the squirrel was black. This color difference continued in the thick hairy tail of the squirrel. I tried my best to identify the squirrel but I could not find a species, outside maybe **Prevost squirrel** (which we saw multiple times in the holiday and is larger in size), that resembles the squirrel that we saw. We headed back down the path, spotting a few more squirrels before we drove back to Padang. Along the way we saw several groups of both **longtailed and pigtailed macaques** that were being fed by humans.



Impressions of the area around Padang

We liked our tour with Imam from SwaraOwa very much. He was an excellent wildlife guide, with a good pair of eyes and with a passion for wildlife and conservation. Though he had no experience with guiding in the area, he did his research well and found the right contacts to

get us our target species. Moreover, he was the only guide our entire holiday that was punctual (something that I as a Dutchman can appreciate) and he made sure that we would eat at different restaurants everyday, so that we could try and experience the local cuisine of Padang.

The Andalas University forest is a relatively easy patch of jungle to walk through, that still holds a diverse amount of mammal species. They even have a small concrete path through the forests that was specially created for ecotourism, but that is rarely used as few tourists visit. The biodiversity of the forests is monitored through a network of wildlife cameras and is also monitored with a thermal drone. Interesting species for mammalwatchers that have shown up in the monitoring efforts are Sumatran tiger (recently), sunbear, Sumatran striped rabbits, species of wild cats, species of muntjak and porcupines. Species that can be found with relative ease (normally) are agile gibbon, Sumatran surili, slow loris (we were unlucky) and civets. Though poaching still occurs right now for some species, I think that this will decline if this area manages to establish itself more as a place for ecotourism. Before going to Sumatra I did a long research into places where you could spot agile gibbons, and I could not really find any spots that are reliable for this species. They are occasionally seen in Way Kembas, but I read several reports of people missing out on them there. Andalas University forest could potentially become that reliable agile gibbon spot that me and other mammal enthusiasts are looking for. Only a short drive from Padang, and it can easily be combined with a trip to the Mentawai Islands or Kerinci National Park. Combine a trip to the Andalas university forest with a day trip to Lembah anai and you can almost certainly add agile gibbons and Sumatran surili to your list.

Siberut and the Mentawai primates

The next morning we got picked up by Imam and brought to the harbor of Padang to take the ferry to South-Siberut. Imam had arranged the ferry-tickets for us and had arranged our pick-up by our next guide Ismail Saumanuk on Siberut. The original plan was to go with Wawan from SwaraOwa to Siberut, but he had to go to a primate conference and to make sure that we would not have to cancel our trip he had arranged Ismail to be our guide. The ferry ride was extremely busy and uncomfortable, as a tall Dutchman I did not really fit in the seats so I moved to the deck of the ship. But the seats here had limited space and could not be called comfortable either. The seas were very rough that day, and you were quite literally being thrown around by the waves from time to time. Imam had told me that about 10 different species of cetaceans can be seen on this 6 hour long ferry trip. But although I did my very best, I saw none, probably because of the rough seas.

Upon arrival in South-Siberut we were greeted by Ismail and his cousin Philemon (who goes by the name of Lemon). They helped us with our luggage and after a short ride on the back of a scooter, we had a lovely lunch at Ismail's home. From there we would take a boat ride in a boat carved out of a tree trunk through the mangroves to a village located on Southwest Siberut to look for the 4 endemic primate species for the next 3.5 days. Ismail was our guide, but he did not really speak English, so Lemon would go with us on this trip as well to do the communication. Our luggage at this point of the holiday was quite heavy, so Lemon suggested leaving it behind at Ismail's house for the next few days, only bringing our backpacks to Southwest Siberut. We did not see the logic behind this, and also had not organized our bags in such a manner. So we asked if we could take our heavy bags on the boat, which was no problem. After a lovely boat-tour to an amazing landscape of mangroves

surrounded by jungle however, we found out why it would have been better to leave our bags behind. To arrive at the village you have to “beach” the boat. This means timing your speed with a wave and then quickly depart from the boat on to the shore. This process did not go too smoothly and one wave went into the boat. As the luggage of Colombe was laying on the bottom of the boat, basically all her clothes, sleeping bag and other stuff was now soaking wet from saltwater.

In the village you stay in a basic house with a lovely view on the beach. The house only has electricity in the evening. The bedroom has a bed, one lamp and a window frame, but no window. The ceiling is rather high, and there is no mosquito net, nor an opportunity to hang your own if you bring one. There are however loads of mosquito's and after one night I counted 122 mosquito bites just on one of my legs. The place is also rather noisy, as people watch TV in the room next to you till late at night. The food that was served was basic but good, and Ismail and Lemon made sure that we were as comfortable as we could be. That evening we took a boat tour on the sea to a cliff, on which Siberut langurs are often spotted. That evening however we were unlucky and we did not see any.

The next morning we woke up at 6 to start our search for the Kloss gibbon and the other endemic primates of Mentawai. Unfortunately it was raining that morning and we had to wait till about 8am before we could head off. We took the boat a few hundred meters to a place where a small river meets the sea and then started walking through the jungle. Though there is some sort of trail, it is largely overgrown and Ismail used a machete to clear the way for us which created a lot of noise. The trail was extremely slippery and I fell multiple times that day. As the clouds cleared, we could hear several families of Kloss gibbons, which brought us in a good spirit. The songs came from relatively close and I thought that seeing a Kloss gibbon would be easy in the next few days. However, I really underestimated the extreme shyness of the gibbons (because of heavy hunting pressure on these animals) and the inaccessibility of the terrain.

Though Ismail did his best to cut ways through the vegetation in the hopes of seeing Kloss gibbons, and although we could hear that we were close to one individual at some point. We never saw a gibbon that morning. We did however encounter a group of **Pigtailed langurs**!. Ismail, who has the eyes of a hawk, spotted them first. Though I could see the trees moving in the distance and hear the characteristic sound of the langurs, it took me about 5 minutes before I finally managed to see my first pigtailed langur. It appeared to be a group of only three individuals, with one subadult. Photographing the animals was difficult, as you basically needed to find a tiny opening through three layers of vegetation. As Pigtailed langurs are also still being hunted on the island, you really had to sneak around, as one sound would cause the animals to run off, which they did in the end, but not before Colombe managed to take a few photos.





That evening we looked for the Siberut langurs from the boat again, but had no luck. People were chopping down some trees on the hills where they are commonly seen. I think that this disturbance had caused the langurs to move off. This was visibly frustrating to Ismail, who had told us that the langurs were always there and we now had not seen them two days in a row. Later that night we looked for **Siberut flying squirrels** in the nearby plantation. We found many individuals, with some being bigger in size than others. We could also see them flying right above us. Later that night, Ismail managed to lure in a Mentawai scops owl, by playing the sound of the animal through a speaker.



The next morning we were told that we would start early to walk a different trail, and that we would have to be ready by 6am. We were ready at 5:45 and waiting for breakfast, which was only served around 7. In the morning we did not hear any gibbons singing, something that surprised me as we heard so many the day before. After about an hour on this trail, Ismail spotted another group of **pigtailed langurs**, but they were moving off in a steep valley so we could not follow the group. Along the way, Ismail told us that the goal of today's walk was reaching a hill where Kloss gibbons can often be seen. But as we approached the hill, we were met with the sounds of chainsaws, which became louder and louder as we got closer. By the time we got to the hill, it had gotten so loud that you needed to raise your voice just to communicate. I was walking in front with Ismail, when all of a sudden a **Siberut macaque** made his way down a tree and disappeared in the dense undergrowth. Though it was only one individual, and I only saw it for a few seconds, I did see it clearly as it was rather close. It probably had not heard us coming over the sound of the chainsaws. Though we did see some nice birds that day, including a Mentawai Malkoha, we did not see any Kloss gibbons. Ismail was visibly angry at the people that were cutting down the forest so close to us. And when we found a pile of freshly cut wooden planks on the way back, Ismail bashed on the planks with his machete really loud and yelled something into the forest that did not sound very positive. That evening we went looking for the Siberut langurs again, this time from the beach as the waves were too big to try by boat. With the thermal I managed to find the **Siberut langurs** but they were very far away and with the binoculars you could only see them if they would move.

That night it was very windy outside with loads of thunder in the distance, and yet between 3 and 4am at night you could hear Kloss gibbons singing from the village from several directions. At first I could not believe this, and I had to leave the house and walk around at night to really confirm for myself that I was hearing gibbons. That morning we woke up at 6 again, to walk on another new trail, breakfast was served again around 7, which made us

wonder why we were getting up at 6 everyday. I told Lemon that I heard the gibbons singing at night and he told me that, because of the intense hunting pressure that the gibbons are facing, the gibbons indeed now sing at the moon and are active on nights when the moon shines bright.

This probably explained why we did not hear any gibbons singing around sunrise on any of the days that we were there.

The third walking day took us on the most difficult trail we walked on Siberut. At the start of the walk we heard **pigtailed langurs** but they were aware of our presence and quickly ran off. We then saw movements in the trees several times that were most likely being caused by primates, but every time we could not see the animals causing the movement of the branches. At some point, while we were walking in a creek in a small valley, two primates jumped over the river in the canopy right above us, but I could not catch much more than a dark glimpse before the animals moved off. I had sort of given up seeing any wildlife that day, until Colombe wanted to use the binoculars because she thought that she had spotted something on a hill. Though she saw nothing, I picked up a **Siberut langur** high in a tree on a hill near us. Pretty soon I could see three different Siberut langurs in the tree. Ismail looked for a way to approach this tree, and eventually found one. The Siberut Langurs, that were as far as we knew still unaware of our presence, were slowly moving from tree to tree.

Eventually we were laying in a mudhole that was clearly being used by wild boars, as there was hair, excrement, and fresh tracks everywhere, looking at the Siberut Langurs. We could not get any closer without being seen. They were now only some 40 meters away, and you could sometimes really see them well. Though they never really sat still long enough in the open to make a photo. After this encounter, we went back to the small river. We would keep following the small river back down until we reached the place where it met the sea and we started our first day of walking. The next day we took the ferry back to Sumatra, on the way back I spotted two species of dolphin; **spinner dolphins** and I think **Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphins**.

Overall impressions of Siberut

Before we even arrived on the island of Siberut, we were already told by Imam, Dr. Rizaldi and Jefrial that the wildlife on the island is in trouble. The forests on the island are being clearcut, and upon both arrival and departure from the islands, large ships filled up with felled trees could be seen laying just offshore. Jefrial told me that he visited the island recently, and that he joined some teenagers on a hunting trip with slingshots. The teenagers basically killed every animal they encountered, including flying foxes and flying squirrels as they believed that this was their tradition. Dr. Rizaldi also told us that in the past he had worked hard with a local community to do research and establish an ecotourism location in a forest on the island. It went quite well, but when he left the island and returned two months later, the entire forest had been clearcut. The local community had exchanged the entire forest with a logging company for two TVs. Imam told us that though Siberut has a national park, nobody knows where the national park starts or ends and that there are no rangers protecting the park. Jefrial and Lemon told us that Kloss gibbon is the local delicacy on the island that was traditionally only eaten on special occasions. Indeed, we were told on our ferry back that gibbons were traditionally only eaten after the birth of a son. But that modernisation of the island had changed island traditions, and had increased the demand for gibbon meat. Apparently locals now see it as a right to hunt gibbons because according to them, it is tradition, but they seem to have blurred out the really low frequency in which it

was done in the past. Even people like our guide Lemon, who openly admitted that the gibbon population now was at the lowest he had ever seen, was arguing with us that hunting should continue because it is tradition. He would tell us that when he was young, gibbon hunting was easy and that you could kill multiple around the village without much effort, while today hunters had to take multiday trekkings through the jungle to just kill one, but he did not seem to understand what this meant for the future of the gibbon population on the island. The other primate species on the island are all hunted as well, which explains their extreme shyness and difficulty to find.

Though Ismail did not speak English, he was a good wildlife guide. He has excellent eyes and could spot and identify animals with the naked eye that I had struggled identifying with my binoculars. He always made sure that we were comfortable and had enough water, and if a trail would become too difficult for example because of slippery rocks, he used his machete to create a way for us. He even got us some ripe durian, though durian season had only just begun. He also really has a passion for wildlife and is really trying his best to save the gibbons of Siberut. Overall he and Lemon made a great team.

Tips for visiting Siberut

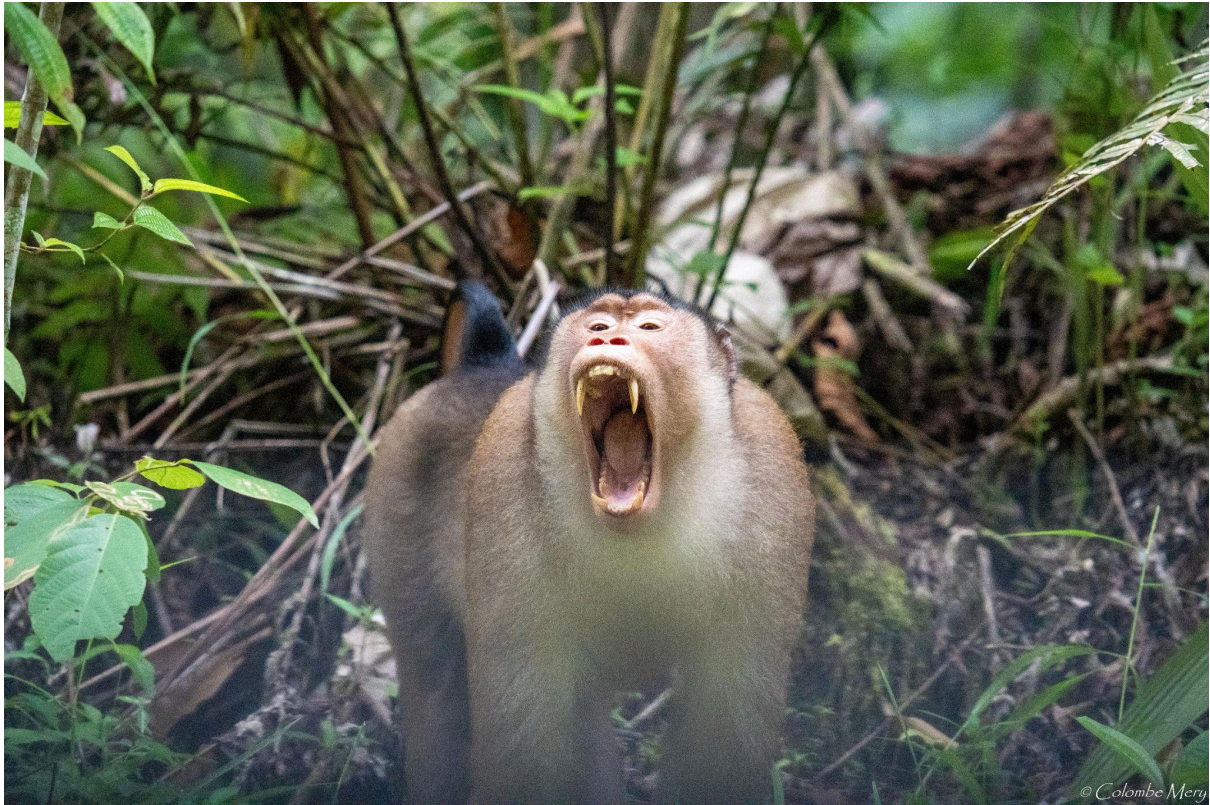
- Bring boots! I had waterproof hiking shoes but that does not suffice. You can buy cheap good quality boots in Padang, but they only sell till about shoesize EU 43. So if you have a bigger size, bring some boots on your trip to Sumatra.
- Plan your trip around new moons! Apparently the Kloss gibbon has become so shy due to overhunting that it now sings at the moon. We were told by Limon that you have a better chance of seeing them on days after a dark night, as the gibbons are then more active during the day.
- Do not swim in the sea when there is on-shore wind! I tried and almost instantly hit a jellyfish. I do not know which species I hit but it was incredibly painful, and I still walk around with the scars 3 weeks later.
- Bring a piece of mosquito net and some tape to cover the window frame. Though mosquitoes were not a problem every night, on the evenings that they were it was absolutely horrible and you get little sleep.

Tapan road

From Siberut we traveled to Kerinci to finish our trip. I contacted the agency WildSumatra and I asked if they had any mammalwatching guides, which they did not. But they did have birdwatching guides and you would often see mammals on these trips. As we also like to photograph and see birds, we opted for 4 days in Kerinci national park on a birding trip, starting with an evening and morning drive on the Tapan road. Let me start saying that Kerinci national park is the most pleasant part of Sumatra that we stayed in. The highlands of this mountainous region makes the overall temperature around 5 degrees cooler and makes the humidity much less of a problem. Furthermore, compared to all other parts of Sumatra that we visited, you still see loads of birds and mammals and they are not shy. The landscape is also really spectacular and just begs you to go on an adventure.

We were picked up at the Grand Kerinci Hotel by our guide Baju. Though we had booked an evening Tapan road drive, He already came to pick us up around 13.00 for an early start of the drive. We quickly managed to spot both species of **macaques**, several species of

squirrels and some **Sumatran Surili**. The plan was to sleep in a tent on the highest part of the Tapan road and then do a night drive to look for mammals and owls. For the third time this holiday however, the weathergods decided for us that we really should not look for mammals in the dark, as it rained basically all night, creating a thick fog on the mountain. Bajju and I discussed and decided that we would bail on the evening drive, as this seemed pointless and instead would start the morning drive extra early at 4am.



In practice we left for our morning drive around 4:30, but it was still completely dark and soon I was hanging out of the car window with my thermal imager while the driver made sure that we drove slow enough to spot some wildlife. We would also occasionally walk on the road to look for the wildlife with flashlights. I quickly managed to find a **large flying fox** with my thermal imager, as well as numerous sleeping birds and some small rodents. At some point while looking down the mountain, I saw a large animal on a tree about 40 metres away. Through the thermal I could identify this as our second **binturong** of the trip. Colombe quickly got the camera ready, but as I aimed the flashlight on the Binturong, he moved out of sight before we could take a photo. We waited for a while hoping that he would come back into view, but sadly he never did. Since this was a birdwatching trip, our guide shifted the main focus at the break of dawn from mammals to birds. But during the morning we still managed to see several groups of **surili**, several squirrels and a **black giant squirrel**. We would also hear singing **siamang** throughout the morning.



The next days we spent looking for birds around the Lake Kaco trail and the trail heading to the Kerinci Vulcano. On the Lake Kaco trail we saw some **surilis** and some squirrels, including one **black giant squirrel**. The birdwatching was more spectacular with three species of hornbill and a Sumatran Ground Cuckoo. On the Mount Kerinci trail we unfortunately had rain again and so our trip was cut short as this was an absolute downpour. But before the rain we did manage to see several groups of **surili** including one individual that tried to kill me as it broke a very large branch right above me that after I dodged it, only landed centimeters away from where I was standing. Would I not have dodged, I probably would have been dead. We also saw **Niobe ground squirrels** and a **shrew-faced squirrel**. The last one appeared only a few meters away on a dead tree, but we were just in the process of switching the camera batteries and by the time the camera was all set, the squirrel was gone.



Impressions of Kerinci

Kerinci is an impressive national park that still holds tigers, clouded leopards, sunbears and tapirs. When we met Bajú he asked us what animal we would like to see the most, and we both answered with Clouded leopard. Bajú was surprised by this answer but answered that he had seen an all black clouded leopard recently near his home, and that although they are rare, he had seen them multiple times. Tapir apparently used to be common around the Tapan road, and were frequently seen in the past. Bajú told us that they still find tapir tracks frequently, but the animals seem to have changed their foraging patterns and are now foraging at different hours. Considering the good state in which we found Kerinci national

park compared to other areas of Sumatra, I do not think that Baju was lying.



Our birdwatching trip with Wildsumatra and Baju was generally really well organized. Wildsumatra donates a part of their revenue directly to the protection of the national park, as well as to the rangers protecting it. It is also worth mentioning that they have only started specialized birding tours in recent history, and that they are planning on adding herp and mammal tours as well. Overall, the homestays and hotels where we stayed were comfortable, and the food was good. Baju was a good guide, with a passion for birds. He used a speaker to lure in as many birds as possible for us to see, and he had a great sense of humor. Things that bothered us a bit about our trip to Kerinci were our taxi drivers. The one from Padang to Kerinci showed up more than half an hour late, and brought his entire family with him in another car to go camping. The drive is about 7 hours, and we were supposed to leave around 18:30. But instead left after 19:00, after which he had to fill up the car at a very busy gas station, which lasted about an hour. Pretty soon after we had to wait at another gas station, as the car of his family now needed to gas up. In the end we could have been, in optimal conditions, at the hotel around 2:30 am. But this ended up being 5:30am. The driver that was bringing us from Kerinci to Padang had a lot of trash laying around in his car, and decided that, while we were driving through nature, it was okay to just throw all of his trash out the window.



