

Trip report – Sabah, Borneo, July 2022.

Ian Thompson

Trip participants: Jon Hall, Ian Thompson, Tracey Watchurst, Phil Telfer, Karen Baker, Charles Hood

Photos by Ian Thompson unless otherwise credited.



Photo: Phil Telfer

There are some places in the world where one trip just isn't enough for avid mammal watchers. Borneo, the world's third largest island, is one of those places. Apart from Charles Hood, all of us had previously visited Borneo. Phil Telfer had been there six times previously, but he's always been a bit of an overachiever. Each of us had particular target species that we had missed on past visits and the itinerary was crafted to maximize our chances of seeing these. We spent eight nights at Deramakot forest reserve, three nights on Mount Kinabalu and two nights at Porohon home stay in Sayap on the northern margin of Kinabalu National Park.

We were guided by Mike Gordon, a character well-known to many on this website. As always, Mike was an exemplary guide. His energy and enthusiasm never flagged on eight-hour night drives and his sense of humour enlivened many a conversation.

East Asia has been the last area in the world to open up from COVID restrictions. One remaining restriction for Japan is that transit passengers have to arrive and depart from Narita airport on the same calendar day or are otherwise subject to Japan's pre-trip and post-arrival testing requirements, quarantine, etc. This unfortunately prevented Tracey and I from taking the most direct route to Borneo, a flight from Vancouver to Tokyo, overnight in Tokyo and then directly to Kota Kinabalu. Instead, we went on an East Asian milk-run via San Francisco, Tokyo and Singapore. Fortunately flights departed and arrived on time. Our time in Narita was spent lining up at a transfer counter for a document check which didn't appear to be recorded anywhere and was thus repeated at the boarding gate. I fell asleep during the flight and awoke to the sight of other passengers tucking into their suppers. I got up and asked one of the flight attendants if I could get supper. She said "of course" and asked if I was hungry and would like dinner, a question I found somewhat puzzling until I returned to my seat and was immediately presented with a Sapporo beer. Clearly a passenger awakening and urgently requiring beer was a more familiar scenario to her than a passenger merely being hungry. I believe many of their flights are to Australia.

Singapore was its usual efficient self and we were on our way to Kota Kinabalu, a flight delayed by stormy weather which necessitated circling around Kota Kinabalu for about an hour before landing. We headed to the bus terminal to catch a bus for Sepilok only to discover that the buses were fully booked until 5:00 pm. This resulted in us arriving at the Sepilok junction just after midnight. Unsurprisingly, no taxis were available at that hour so we started the 2.5 km walk to Sepilok Jungle Resort against a backdrop of menacing thunderclaps. The gate to the resort was locked but fortunately scalable and we wandered through the various passages until we found someone at the Banana Café who showed us to our room. As we were settling in, we bumped into a couple of Irish guys whom we had noticed in Kota Kinabalu boarding an earlier bus than ours. They looked a bit frazzled and stated that they had been chased into hiding by the various feral dogs in Sepilok.

The next morning we had our first mammals, a pair of Plantain Squirrels. The highlight of the pre-breakfast walk for me was an Asian Water Monitor catching a struggling fish in one of the ponds on the resort grounds. We joined Phil Telfer and Karen Baker for breakfast and then all went to the Rain Forest Discovery Centre where we found our first Prevost's Squirrels of the trip. Jon and Charles arrived shortly after lunch and we headed off to Telupid where we switched to a couple of four-wheel-drives for the drive to Deramakot. We saw a troop of Long-tailed Macaques by the road and one palm civet, likely an Island Palm Civet, on the edge of the road. Jon and Charles in the other vehicle had glimpses of a mouse deer and another palm civet.



Arriving at Deramakot shortly after dark we had a delicious supper and then left for a night drive at about 9:00 pm. Sightings included Thomas's Flying Squirrel, Bornean Striped Palm Civet, Sambar, Red/Common Giant Flying Squirrel, two Banded Civets, Philippine Slow Loris, Malay Civet and Bornean/Sunda Colugo. We arrived back about 1:40 am, tired and happy.



The next morning we departed about 6:00 am. We saw a number of Bornean Orangutans and more Prevost's Squirrels. Notable avian highlights included Rhinoceros Hornbill, Wreathed Hornbill and Bornean Crested Fireback. We decided to do an afternoon and evening drive before adopting an almost entirely nocturnal schedule for the remainder of our stay, leaving about 3:30 pm. I was asking Mike about the possibility of seeing muntjac and being told they were rarely seen on the road when, as if on cue, a Bornean Yellow Muntjac appeared at the side of the road. This immediately triggered a flurry of questions about Clouded Leopards and Marbled Cats. We stopped at the edge of a tributary to the Kinabatangan River for coffee and cake. Shortly after resuming our drive back to the lodge we spotted a Sun Bear to the right of the road at kilometre 29. We later saw a mother Asian Elephant and her young who ambled down the road in front of us for a while and then trumpeted loudly in displeasure as we drove past. This appeared to be a signature move for the elephants in Borneo and was repeated numerous times over the next week. Other new species for the trip included a Southern Pig-tailed Macaque seen up in a tree, Island/Bornean Palm Civet and a Large Flying Fox. The other species seen on the previous night's drive were all again recorded apart from Banded Civet. After arriving back at the lodge about 11:00 pm for a late supper, Jon and I went up into the forest behind the lodge to look for tarsiers at a spot where Phil had previously seen them. We saw a couple of colugos but nothing else.



Next morning Tracey and I slept in until about 7:00 am, then did a brief walk and saw a group of Long-tailed Macaques. Jon, Charles and Mike, who'd headed the other way, saw Yellow-throated Marten and North Borneo/Northern Gray Gibbon as well as more Prevost's Squirrels. At breakfast Phil announced that he had been reviewing yesterday's photos of the muntjac, one of which appeared to show a Tufted Ground Squirrel attached to the muntjac's belly. Having read reports of these "vampire squirrels" on the Internet, all of us were thrilled to hear this until Phil passed the photographic evidence to Jon, who stated "that's the raised left foreleg of the muntjac, not a three-legged muntjac with a ground squirrel stuck to its belly", much to everyone's disappointment.

After breakfast a brief walk down the road revealed a couple of Bornean Orangutans and a single gibbon. We spent the day largely relaxing until the evening's night drive at 7:00. Shortly after departing from the station, we saw a second Sun Bear in a tree, which descended with alacrity and disappeared into the underbrush. New species on this night drive included Sunda Leopard Cat, Black Flying Squirrel, Diadem Roundleaf/Leaf-nosed Bat and a White-collared Fruit Bat eating a fruit. A brief sighting of a mammal at the edge of the road might have been an Otter Civet. This triggered a mad scramble by all out of the vehicle and up a muddy embankment but we were unable to get confirmatory views. We arrived back about 4:00 am. On the night drive I distinguished myself by my phenomenal skill in noticing the Km. marker posts at great distances and warning people that there might be some eyeshine ahead. I believe with all modesty that I was well on the way to completing the full set of 30 and even nailed some duplicates, just to prove that my sightings weren't flukes.



At the next morning's breakfast we were regaled by stories from Mike Gordon, a natural-born raconteur. Jon saw a treeshrew behind the cabins while I took a late morning walk and saw a small troop of Maroon Langurs within a kilometre of the station. The afternoon's walk was truncated by a heavy downpour. It continued to rain after dinner, but we were so enthusiastic that we decided to leave for an evening drive nonetheless. The rain was so intense that we were unlikely to see anything. All of us were probably thinking "let's turn back", but it took Charles to point out the obvious and we headed back to ditch our wet stuff. The rain stopped about 9:15 and we were back on the road shortly thereafter in very light drizzle. The usual species from previous night drives were seen. About 11:30 pm, we were looking down from a rise and noticed eye shine on the left side of the road ahead. I was in the front left seat of the vehicle and thought "that looks feline, must be a leopard cat". The vehicle was stopped so we drove a little closer to stop again as the cat was emerging into view. It paused for a moment or so for people to get binoculars on it and then crossed the road. There was a hush amongst the group. We turned to Tracey, who as an artist and as the only person in the vehicle without a list of target species, was less likely to be affected by observer bias about what she had seen. She stated she had seen a lean, grey, long-tailed cat with a small head reminiscent of a puma or jaguarundi. This matched what the rest of us had observed. With feelings of incredulity mixed with euphoria we realized that this was a Bay Cat. We drove to the spot where it had crossed the road and made some squeaking sounds without results, drove about 10 minutes ahead, stopped for a bit, then came back to the site where we'd seen it just in case it was hanging around, but without success. We continued back to the station and got a good look at a Binturong feeding up in a fig tree quite close to the station. We stopped at the station for coffee and cake and also reviewed Bay Cat videos and descriptions in the mammal book. For myself, and I think for all of us, it was a singular feeling, a gradually rising feeling of elation at having seen something one knows one will see only once in a lifetime.



We headed out again and were rewarded with the sight of a Sunda Leopard Cat. We turned out the lights, made squeaking noises and watched with thermal imagers as it returned to the road. This allowed a good second look and the chance to confirm that it was a significantly smaller felid than the Bay Cat. We saw another Banded Civet, Bornean Sunda Tree Mouse, Grey Tree Rat and a Trefoil Horseshoe Bat as well as species seen previously. We arrived back at about 6:00 am just as the sky was lightening. Jon and I walked up to the fig tree to see if we could get photos of the Binturong in the daytime. It had disappeared and a Plantain Squirrel was the only mammal seen.

The only new mammal seen on that evening's night drive was a Rane Mouse. We did see two further Binturongs, both in fig trees, and watched a Black Flying Squirrel glide perhaps 150 metres from one tree to another. The highlight of the drive for me was a Striped Bronzeback tree snake which posed nicely for photos. We arrived back at the lodge about 3:30 am.



I spent some time the afternoon of the next day sitting at the back of the cabin observing the forest just beyond. I didn't see any mammals but did get a good look at a Draco flying lizard. We were able to photograph some bats under the dining hall which turned out to be Fawn Roundleaf/Fawn-coloured Leaf-nosed Bats. We left on the evening's night drive at 7:00 pm and quickly saw yet another Binturong, then a Sunda Skunk/Stink-badger appeared on the road ahead of us and kept to the road for about 100 meters. Another vehicle from the Lodge had seen Marbled Cat around kilometre 27 so we drove slowly and carefully in this area but did not see the cat ourselves. We did get a good look at a Greater Mouse Deer who stayed in one spot allowing for photographs.



Photo: Charles Hood

The next morning Tracey and I went for a short walk after breakfast and had good views of Rhinoceros Hornbills overhead for our efforts. Lunch consisted of pizza and lentil soup, with green-coloured sweet bean balls rolled in coconut for dessert. Karen remarked that the balls looked like testicles, to which Jon replied “if you think those look like testicles I think Phil should see a doctor.”

At 2:00 pm we drove down to the Kinabatangan River, seeing Bornean Orangutan, Long-tailed Macaques and Southern Pig-tailed Macaques along the way. Charles went by boat upriver to try for Proboscis Monkey but without success. On the way back we saw another leopard cat as well as the usual flying squirrels, civets, elephants, slow loris and colugo. We arrived back at 10:00 pm for a late supper and were planning to head out again when heavy rain started. The plan was amended on the spot to go out early the next morning instead.



We left at 4:30 in the morning with the rain ceasing just as we were leaving. Two leopard cats were seen well. Lunch was surprisingly meagre, consisting of cream of mushroom soup and garlic bread. A German couple with close cropped grey hair and similar outfits who had arrived that morning remarked that the chef had put us on a strict diet. We suggested the chef had probably quit after seeing Phil put the dessert sweet bean cakes in his lentil soup the previous day.

Jon and I went out for a hike after dark to look for tarsiers but again without success. A night drive from 7:30 pm until 1:40 am revealed only previously seen mammals, although we did get a good look at a Dog-toothed Cat snake.



The next morning, our last in Deramakot, we packed up early and left about 8:30 am. We did get a nice look at a tree monitor lizard on the way. We swapped vehicles in Telupid and then continued on to Ranau for lunch. Phil came back from using the restroom telling us that he'd seen a squirrel while using the men's urinal. Suddenly four of us were standing at the urinal with our binoculars, to the amazement of the restaurant guests. We identified the squirrels as Plantain Squirrels as Mike shook his head with pity. That afternoon we arrived at Kinabalu Park. At our first stop just inside the entrance we saw our first Bornean Black-banded Squirrels while Mike went to purchase tickets.

The accommodation at the Sutera resort on Mount Kinabalu was lovely, with spacious chalets overlooking the forest. We left about 5:00 pm for the 4.5 km walk up to Timpohon Gate. Our first new species was Jentink's Squirrel, several of which were moving about incredibly quickly in the trees. We arrived at the gate about dusk and spotted one large fawn-coloured rat by the garbage bins as well as a dark rat with a creamy-white belly and throat at the same spot. While walking down the hill we got good views of two Spotted Giant Flying Squirrels, a new species for all of us. We arrived back at the lodge at about 9:00 pm for a very cold buffet supper accompanied by warm water to drink. I would have preferred the temperatures of the two components were reversed, but was too tired to care much.

Examination of the trees around the chalets the next morning revealed a Whitehead's Broadbill and several Sculptor Squirrels. We hiked along the Silau Silau trail and saw absolutely nothing, as is so often the case when the animals are in fact all around the lodge. Breakfast consisted of lovely omelettes although the fact that none of us wanted diced carrots in our omelettes prompted a lively discussion with a Malaysian couple in the dining room. At 10:00 am we took a vehicle up to the gate where a good variety of squirrels were beginning their day's activities. There were a number of Bornean Black-banded

Squirrels as well as Bornean Mountain Ground Squirrels and Mountain Treeshrews. Two rats of different sizes were also seen running about. The walk down the mountain produced a Borneo Forest Dragon on a tree and a Kinabalu Squirrel, first spotted by Tracey as was often the case. The lunchtime conversation focused on the number of things Whitehead got named after himself in addition to pimples. We drove up to Timpohon Gate around 4:00 pm and walked downhill. We again saw several rats, as well as two Spotted Giant Flying Squirrels and a Bornean Striped Palm Civet. The highlight of the walk was a likely Javanese/Horsfield's Flying Squirrel seen briefly.





The next morning's walk again produced Mountain Treeshrew, Jentink's Squirrel and Bornean Black-banded Squirrel. A couple of Anderson's Woolly Horseshoe Bats were noted under an overhang and a couple of Brooke's Squirrels were seen briefly near the main administrative building for the park. The morning's observation from the platform revealed only previously-seen species. Trying out a new mammal spotting theory, Tracey and I walked down the Silau Silau trail thinking that if we hadn't seen any mammals on it yesterday regression to the mean might suggest an increased probability of seeing something today. No evidence to validate this theory appeared. The afternoon became incredibly misty which engendered some down time for all of us. The evening's trip up the mountain provided great views of a Sabah Giant Rat in addition to previously-seen species. We also got a good look at an extremely relaxed Whiskered Flying Squirrel. We waited for a while at the corner where linsang had been seen on a couple of occasions in the past but without success.





Early the next morning I did a solo walk around part of the Liwagu trail and bumped into a green magpie, one of the birds I'd been hoping to see. Walking up the entrance road I met up with Jon and we observed a couple of Sunda/Pale Giant Squirrels, the first ones seen on the trip. Breakfast was excellent as usual, apart from some mysterious slabs of meat advertised as beef bacon but more likely ancient discarded shoe insoles. I think we were all sad to see the end of our stay at Sutera Lodge but packed up and left about 11:00. At lunch we reviewed Karen's mammal list as she was getting close to 800 species and Jon wanted her to experience a mega tick and the ensuing mammalgasm for her 800th. Jon went through a review of recent splits in places she had visited, although Karen wasn't a fan of this approach and Tracey worried we were splitting hares.

We arrived at the Porohon homestay in Sayap in the late afternoon, a locale chosen because of its proximity to spots where there had been previous sightings of Tufted Ground Squirrel, a prime target for all of us. The grounds of the homestay were gorgeous, the rooms basic apart from elaborate comforters on the bed which smelled musty, likely due to the significant humidity. Tracey and I asked for sheets instead but were brought polyester blankets which looked every bit as uncomfortable as they turned out to be. The drive to the park entrance from Porohon took about 45 minutes on a steep and bumpy dirt road. A short walk in the park produced our first Whitehead's Pygmy Squirrels as well as a number of leeches. On the way down we had a good look at a Rapit Rat as well as a couple of mystery rodents.





The next morning we returned to the same trail. A fruiting fig tree produced Whitehead's Pygmy Squirrels, Bornean Black-banded Squirrels, Prevost's squirrels and possibly a Kinabalu Squirrel. While relaxing by the side of the river we had a good look at a Rajah Brooke's Birdwing. That afternoon we returned to the park after heavy rain and a brief nap and saw several Bornean Horned Frogs, Mike's totem animal and the subject of one of his tattoos. We also got a close look at a Sabah Pit-viper by the side of the trail.



The next morning we grabbed several plastic chairs from the park entrance shelter and positioned ourselves by the fruiting fig tree for an anticipated Squirrelapalooza. I did a brief walk on one of the trails which revealed a treeshrew, most likely Lesser Treeshrew, as well as an impressive number of leeches. We went back for a quick swim and then packed up for the drive back to Kota Kinabalu. The most memorable moment on the drive back occurred when the driver, hearing some rattling under the vehicle, stopped in the middle of the lane on a blind corner to look under the vehicle. Had we been struck by an oncoming vehicle, the rattling would surely have been the least of our worries. He found a piece of plastic to bend back into shape and the rattling stopped, which was great mainly because it forestalled the need to stop again in similar circumstances.

We spent the night in a hotel near Tanjung Aru beach which provided a stunning spot to walk on the beach and watch the sun set, before heading home the next evening.

In all, it was a great trip. Mike's guiding was fantastic as always, the company convivial, the wildlife sightings outstanding and the meals and accommodation excellent. I believe several of us are already dreaming of future Borneo trips. It really is a destination of which one never tires; where, no matter how many astounding animals one has seen, there are always new and spectacular sights awaiting around the next bend in the road.

List of mammal species seen:

Asian Elephant (*Elephas maximus*)
Pale Giant Squirrel (*Ratufa affinis*)
Tufted Pygmy Squirrel (*Exilisciurus whiteheadi*)
Brooke's Squirrel (*Sundasciurus brookei*)
Bornean Mountain Ground Squirrel (*S.everetti*)
Jentink's Squirrel (*S.jentinki*)
Sculptor Squirrel (*Glyphotes simus*) -
Plantain Squirrel (*Callosciurus notatus*)
Borneo Black-banded Squirrel (*C.orestes*)
Prevost's Squirrel (*C.prevostii*)
Kinabalu Squirrel (*C. baluensis*)
Javanese Flying Squirrel (*Iomys horsfieldii*) (?)
Whiskered Flying Squirrel (*Petinomys genibarbis*)
Spotted Giant Flying Squirrel (*Petaurista elegans*)
Common Giant Flying Squirrel (*P.petaurista*)
Black Flying Squirrel (*Aeromys tephromelas*)
Thomas's Flying Squirrel (*A.thomasi*)
Greater Pencil-tailed Tree Mouse (*Chiropodomys major*)
Sundaic Haeromys (*Haeromys pusillus*)
Montane Bornean Niviventer (*Niviventer rapit*)
Asian House Rat (*Rattus tanezumi*)
Kinabalu Rat (*Rattus baluensis*) - endemic
Long-tailed Giant Rat (*Leopoldamys sabanus*)
Sundaic Lenothrix (*Lenothrix cana*)
Mountain Treeshrew (*Tupaia montana*)
Lesser Treeshrew (*T. minor*)
Sunda Flying Lemur (*Galeopterus variegatus*)
Philippine Slow Loris (*Nycticebus menagensis*)

Crab-eating Macaque (*Macaca fascicularis*)
Southern Pig-tailed Macaque (*M.nemestrina*)
Maroon Leaf Monkey (*Presbytis rubicunda*)
Northern Gray Gibbon (*Hylobates funereus*)
Bornean Orangutan (*Pongo pygmaeus*)
White-collared Fruit Bat (*Megaerops albicollis*)
Sunda Short-nosed Fruit Bat (*Cynopterus brachyotis*)(?)
Large Flying-fox (*Pteropus vampyrus*)
Fawn-colored Leaf-nosed Bat (*Hipposideros cervinus*)
Diadem Leaf-nosed Bat (*H.diadema*)
Andersen's Woolly Horseshoe Bat (*Rhinolophus foetidus*)
Trefoil Horseshoe Bat (*R.trifoliatus*)
Borneo Bay Cat (*Catopuma badia*)
Sunda Leopard Cat (*Prionailurus javanensis*)
Malay Civet (*Viverra zibetha*)
Bornean Striped Palm Civet (*Arctogalidia stigmatica*)
Binturong (*Arctictis binturong*)
Bornean Palm Civet (*Paradoxurus philippinensis*)
Banded Civet (*Hemigalus derbyanus*)
Sun Bear (*Helarctos malayanus*)
Sunda Stink-badger (*Mydaus javanensis*)
Yellow-throated Marten (*Martes flavigula*)
Greater Oriental Chevrotain (*Tragulus napu*)
Bornean Yellow Muntjac (*Muntiacus atherodes*)
Sambar (*Rusa unicolor*)

53 species