



Tripreport Sabah (Borneo, Malaysia)

2019

October 7th-31st

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www.shutterednature.com



Sabah October 7th till October 31st.

This was the second part of the trip I had planned to do after my studies were finished. Initially the plan was to go to Borneo for three months, I actually have asked for advice on the forum of Mammalwatching.com for that. Later I decided to change my mind and go for South-America, even later I decided to go for a combo: first three months South-America and then three weeks in Borneo. The road to Borneo was a long and bumpy one and I also ran into some difficulties during the trip, but in the end it was all worth it. The funny thing was that literally a week before my plane left, I still wasn't sure if I could go, so looking back I'm really glad it all worked out.

I travelled by myself but I did the first thirteen days of the trip together with Duncan McNiven and Debbie Pain from England and later we did our first five nights in Deramakot with Stuart Chapman and Nick Cox. It was nice searching for mammals (and birds) with these guys and it was really cool that the four of us managed to see Clouded Leopard together on one of the last nights of Stuart and Nick.

I did fly on Tawau, which is not the nearest airport if you want to go to Danum but that was because I was first supposed to go with someone else, who backed out last minute and it was too expensive to change the destination. It's a two hour bus ride from Tawau to Lahad Datu so that's not too bad.

I had set some goals in terms of mammals and birds for this trip. Of course I wanted to work on my goal to see all cats in the world. Borneo has five species, all of which were new for me. I had set the goal to see at least two of those. I figured Sunda Leopard Cat would be a guarantee and all the other cats are tough so any one of them would do. Secretly I hoped that one would be a Clouded Leopard because size matters after all. Other mammals on my list were Western Tarsier, Proboscis Monkey, Orang Utan, Slow Loris and Bornean Pygmy Elephant, so not a very long list and I figured it would be doable. For birds I did it how I usually do, set a couple of species as targets and then try to see as many birds as possible on top of that. For this trip my targets were Bornean Bristlehead and Rhinoceros Hornbill, both because of their appearance. I knew Bristlehead would be tough and Rhinoceros Hornbill would be easy. I got all of my targets and on top of that some more. The best thing about the trip for me was that I saw four of the five cats of Borneo! Only Bay Cat eluded me, but that was to be expected.

Bonus photo tip: I see a lot of photo's of people from mammals at night that all have the eyes completely lit up. Of course this is very common when you are photographing an animal at night, but it looks a lot better if you can avoid that. I practiced a lot with that so my tip would be if you are on your own, try to keep the light in one hand as far away from the other hand with your camera as possible. If you have someone else holding the light it will be easier. Even if you don't manage to get dark pupils, it will not be hard to edit that out later and make it black again. As long as the retina's show colour it should still look pretty natural. I'm sure I'm not the first one who has figured that out, so do with it what you want!

Some general remarks about the country

I only travelled in Sabah, so only the Malaysian part of Borneo. This was my first visit to East-Asia so I can't really compare it to other countries in the region. In the restaurants I had some funny experiences. The first ones the waiters would always ask me when I was finished ordering, 'Is that all?', looking at me like the only thing I ordered was a glass of tap water. I think they just tried to be polite. Also in the restaurant was a sign saying 'If you eat more cheese, you are much harder to kidnap', a very cleverly thought out slogan to promote a particular brand of cheese 😊. In another restaurant I had some battles with shrimps. It was actually a pretty fancy once, but you would get soup with fully-scaled shrimps in it (so I mean shrimps that have not been peeled, or however you say that). So the choice is to either leave the shrimps in peace (which is a waste of tasty shrimp), crunch them down and hope you somehow manage to digest all the scales, or the third option lay out your fancy napkin, fish out all the shrimps and de-scale them one by one like a caveman. I picked the last option of course. So pretty eventful restaurant experiences.

Also keep in mind that a lot of local people are Muslim and do not appreciate it if you bring beer with you in the house/hostel. I bought beer with some French guys after a brilliant Bornean Ground Cuckoo observation, thinking the owners were okay with it. They were not, so after our first beer we put the rest somewhere away from the house. Not such a big deal, but make sure to check thoroughly with your hosts before bringing in any beer!

Language

I usually try to be able to speak a bit of the local language, but in this case I didn't know a single word. I was fine, most people speak (a bit of) English and when they don't there is usually someone nearby who does.

Transport

There are big buses and minibuses. Anyone of them can usually be boarded by being in the right place at the right time and making clear you want to come along. They will stop and you'll pay on board. Usually people from hotels/hostels know the schedule of the buses and can even make an arrangement for you, they can also be full! The big ones are the best to go with obviously. Taxis are not so expensive and affordable.

Sim Card

Go for Maxis or Hotlink for the best signal (particularly in Deramakot).

Schedule of the trip

October

07: Amsterdam-Doha

08: Doha-Kuala Lumpur

09: Kuala Lumpur-Tawau

10: Tawau-Lahad Datu-Danum

11-13: Danum Valley Field Centre

15-23: Deramakot

24-26: Kinabatang River (Osman's Homestay)

27-30: Mount Kinabalu, leaving on the 30th from Kota Kinabalu

31: KK-Kuala Lumpur-Doha-Amsterdam.

About the areas

Sabah might just have the best tripreport/surface ratio of any place on Mammalwatching.com so there is little new I can say. I will put in my own experience with the places though.

Danum Valley Field Centre

I slept in the hostel. This is a big room full of bunkbeds on both sides. It has fans. It was fine, especially as I had no one sleeping on the beds around me. It's possible to go on nightdrives. You can go on a 1,5 hour night drive which costs 160 MYR total, you share that amount with everyone who comes along. The other option is going for a private night drive for 320 MYR which will give you three hours. Then you're also in charge of who comes along, I would go for the last option because the extra time is worth it. You could also drive the road to Danum by yourself, that wouldn't be hard and it has been done by others. Based on what I've read so far and on our success I think you would definitely see some good stuff if you put in the same time at Danum as people usually do at Deramakot. The trails can officially only be walked with park rangers. However the big road is allowed, and we also did the trails on our own. Nobody minded. I also went in alone at night after I was sure everyone was already back. I saw groups of twenty leaving for a night walk... To me that's just a waste of time. On my own I found a Tarsier, the thermal scope is also very good for finding sleeping pitta's.

Deramakot

Visited a lot by mammalwatchers. Of course Mike is a very well-known guide there and I'm sure his reputation is well-deserved. My guide however for ten days was Adee, also from AA Borneo and I can recommend her without hesitation. She picked up a lot of stuff and was quick to ID almost anything. I found the night drives at Deramakot to be pretty exciting, you get a lot more eyeshine than I was used to until now from other places and there is a lot of good stuff around. After the first six nights it got a bit more boring, but I went out with a bang with a good sighting of an Otter Civet. You could think about driving the road yourself, or taking your own car with you to do some driving on your own during the day, but make sure you are actually allowed to. Stuart and Nick had their own car but were not allowed to drive by themselves in Deramakot.

Kinabatang River (Osman's Homestay)

There are many options along the Kinabatang, but I can recommend Osman's. His wife makes the best food and he is a really nice guy. He talks quite a lot, but at night he is very sharp. I went out for most of my time there with his brother-in-law Romsy who is the go-to guy for birds, his specialty is Bornean Ground-Cuckoo. He is also very sharp, but I think Osman knows better places for mammals (Flat-headed Cat). I will go into more detail on this species, in the list of species, but I think here it is worth mentioning that Osman showed me a picture of a big male Clouded Leopard during the day eating a prey... He told me he had actually seen four together at night a couple of days ago. I'm usually a bit wary with these kinds of stories, but he definitely has seen Clouded Leopards. Apparently he has a place for them on the land of his father-in-law. I think your best bet for them is still Deramakot or Danum, but you could give it a shot. Only don't bring beers to his house to celebrate!

Mount Kinabalu

Less visited by mammal watchers than the other places. I didn't do much mammal watching at night because birds were my main goal. I walked up every morning at four with the thermal scope from the hostels to the Tempohon Gate. I saw a bat, a mouse and a Small-toothed Palm Civet. I think it could be very interesting if someone took the time to really go for mammals for ten days straight or so and explore the trails but it won't be me. If you go there, try to book early. There are these cabins that cost about €50,- a night, mine was 130, which was above budget but worth the trouble. However on a small wallet you can also book one of the hostels outside of the park, by foot the park is accessible anytime, even though on the internet it says it opens at 7.00.

List of mammals

Go to <https://malaysia.observation.org/user/lifelist/47799>. For all my sightings and the exact location for as far as the location is not obscured.

1. **Borneo Pygmy Elephant (*Elephas maximus borneensis*):** Seen a couple of times. Saw my firsts on the same night I saw the Clouded Leopard (yay!) and had a couple more sightings in Deramakot. Also seen a few during the day. At the Kinabatang river I had multiple sightings of the same group hanging around in the same area. Others saw them swim and in the evening I heard the quads of the plantations chasing away the elephants. It seems that they get less and less space to move around at the Kinabatang which causes regular visits to the gardens of the people living there.



2. **Pygmy tree shrew (*Tupaia minor*)**: Had one sighting in the morning in Deramakot.
3. **Mountain Tree Shrew (*Tupaia montana*)**: Saw one on my last day at Kinabalu near the road between the visitor centre and the lodges.



4. **Large Tree Shrew (*Tupaia tana*)**: Had one sitting on a branch near the river at Kinabatang.



5. **Sunda Flying Lemur (*Galeopterus variegatus*):** Saw some at Danum, saw many at Deramakot including a red morph and one with a baby.



6. **Philippine Slow Loris (*Nycticebus menagensis*):** Saw some at Danum, saw many at Deramakot including some very good sightings.





7. **Western Tarsier (*Tarsius bancanus*)**: A very pleasant surprise on my first nightwalk at Danum, saw it on the way back in the thermal. It was at eye level right next to the path so a great sighting. It was just past the viewpoint over the river on the trail that eventually lead to the waterfall.





8. **Long-tailed Macaque (*Macaca fascicularis*):** Saw them at Danum, Deramakot and Kinabatang.



9. **Southern Pig-tailed Macaque (*Macaca nemestrina*):** Saw them at Danum and Deramakot, but not so great. My best sightings were at the river where they are really easy to see and fun to watch.





10. Proboscis Monkey (*Nasalis larvatus*): Really cool monkeys! Guaranteed at the Kinabatang River, not seen anywhere else.





- 11. Maroon Langur (*Presbytis rubicunda*):** Very beautiful monkey, seen at Danum, Deramakot and Kinabatang.



- 12. Silvery Langur (*Trachypithecus cristatus*):** Seen at Kinabatang on multiple days.



13. North Borneo Gibbon (*Hylobates funereus*): Seen at Danum, Deramakot and Kinabatang.



14. Bornean Orangutan (*Pongo pygmaeus*): Surprisingly hard, saw one female at Deramakot and one huge male at Kinabatang (really cool sighting, very low and at the same time we found a Bornean Ground Cuckoo!). Sadly no good photos, so I need to go back for those.



15. Black Flying Squirrel (*Aeromys tephromelas*): Seen very close at Danum and multiple times at Deramakot, I would say about once in every three days.





- 16. Thomas's Flying Squirrel (*Aeromys thomasi*):** Seen more than Giant Red Flying Squirrel, guides at Danum did apparently not know this species existed. All photos I have of the ones over there show Thomas's. Seen multiple times as well at Deramakot.



- 17. Ear-spot Squirrel (*Callosciurus adamsi*):** Seen once at Deramakot, also see photo. I think it's this one, but feel free to comment.





18. Bornean Black-banded Squirrel (*Callosciurus orestes*): Seen a couple of times at Kinabalu.



- 19. Prevost's Squirrel (*Callosciurus prevostii*):** The most common squirrel during the day, seen at Danum and Deramakot.



- 20. Bornean Mountain Ground Squirrel (*Dremomys everetti*):** Seen a couple of times at Kinabalu.



- 21. Bornean Pygmy Squirrel (*Excilisciurus exilis*):** Seen a couple at Deramakot including an extremely tiny one. Actually checked the size later with a phone, it can't have been more than eight centimetres from head to the tip of its tail!



- 22. Low's Squirrel (*Sundasciurus lowi*)** Seen once at Deramakot



- 23. Whiteheads Pygmy Squirrel (*Exilisciurus whitheadi*):** Cutest squirrel ever! Seen once at Kinabalu.



- 24. Hose's Pygmy Flying Squirrel (*Petaurillus hosei*):** Seen but not counted, Adee saw one flying and later I saw the eyeshine from what must have been the squirrel. Only saw the eyeshine and nothing else, even when I took a photo and zoomed in. No idea why I couldn't see a head or body, probably because they are so small.

- 25. Red Giant Flying Squirrel (*Petaurista petaurista*):** Common at Deramakot.





26. Giant Squirrel (*Ratufa affinis*): Seen a couple of times at Danum and Deramakot.



27. Jentink's Squirrel (*Sundasciurus jentinki*): Seen once at Kinabalu.



28. Large Sunda Tree Mouse (*Chiropodomys major*): Seen once at night at Kinabalu



29. Rane Mouse spec. (*Haeromys pusillus/margarettae*): Probably Lesser, seen at Deramakot.

30. Malayan Porcupine (*Hystrix brachyura*): My first porcupine ever! Seen multiple times at Deramakot.



31. Moonrat (*Echinosorex gymnura*): Really cool mammal, seen twice at Deramakot.



32. Diadem Roundleaf Bat (*Hipposideros diadema*): Very common at Danum and Deramakot.



Below another Roundleaf Bat I saw at Kinabalu (at about 1500 meters), comments on ID are appreciated.



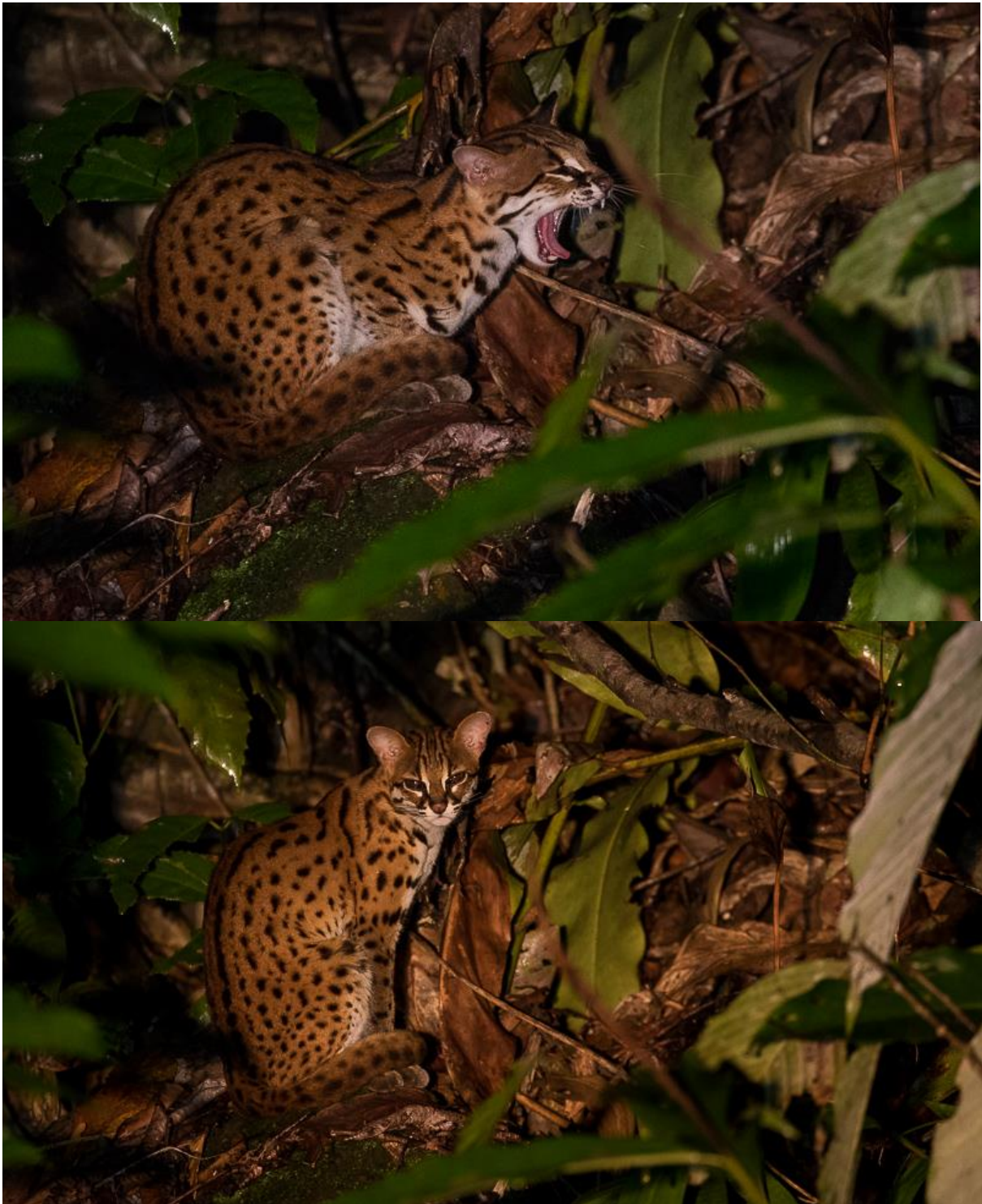
33. Bornean Clouded Leopard (*Neofelis diardi borneensis*): The good stuff! Had one sighting at Deramakot, really cool! Could follow her for about a minute and a half. Highlight of the trip. See my website for the story more photo's and a video made by Stuart Chapman. For a direct link go to: <http://shutterednature.com/language/en/2019/10/headlights-in-the-mist/>.



34. Marbled Cat (*Pardofelis marmorata*): Yes the second big one! Saw this cat on our third night drive at Danum, great sighting it was sleeping on a tree branch above us. We watched it for about fifteen minutes and then it came down the tree!



35. Sunda Leopard Cat (*Prionailurus javanensis*): Easy to see at Deramakot, had one really great sighting where we could watch one for a longer time while it followed an Island Palm Civet, which apparently is distinctive behaviour. We also had a pair calling to each other.





36. Flat-headed Cat (*Prionailurus planiceps*): Yes also number four! Seen at Kinabatang. I'm still beating myself up over this one. Saw it on my last night at Kinabatang. Did not expect it at all and I thought Osman had a civet or something. I put my torch in the same direction and the cat didn't like that so it walked away. I clearly saw the body which was black/dark grey with white on the inside of the legs. Sadly did not see the head, I need to go back for this one! Pretty cool to have all four cats in one trip though. I was able to take the crappiest of crappy pictures on which you can actually see the dark outside of the legs and the white inside. As far as I know there isn't a mammal on Borneo that looks similar so I consider it a record shot!



Actually Flat-headed Cats are more easy then I thought they would be. It's been a while since there were regular sightings reported on Mammalwatching.com at Kinabatang but judging on what I heard from Osman they are as much around as ever. I saw this one with a high river which is very lucky. The trick is to go during a drought, the river banks need to be exposed. Osman told me he saw one two weeks ago for 5 days straight and showed me a video of one very close taken with his cell phone. You can always try your luck but a drought should give you a decent chance. Just hop on a plane as soon as there is news about forest fires in Indonesia!

37. Small-toothed Palm Civet (*Arctogalidia trivirgata*): Common at Deramakot, also seen once at Kinabalu.



38. Sunda Otter Civet (*Cynogale bennettii*): Seen twice at Deramakot. First sighting was really bad, but the second one was pretty good.



39. Banded Palm Civet (*Hemigalus derbyanus*): For some reason seen once at Danum, once at Deramakot and once at Kinabatang. Certainly not an easy one. The one at Kinabatang was funny because we walked in the forest at night at a random place to search for Bay Owl and then we had one walking in front of us.



40. Island Palm Civet (*Paradoxurus hermaphroditus*): Common at Deramakot.



41. Malayan Civet (*Viverra zibetha*): Surprisingly large, very common everywhere. I had one sniffing my boots at Danum!





42. Asian Small-clawed Otter (*Aonyx cinereus*): Had a group of 5 on the river bank of a tributary of Kinabatang one morning.



43. Bearded Pig (*Sus barbatus*): Very common everywhere



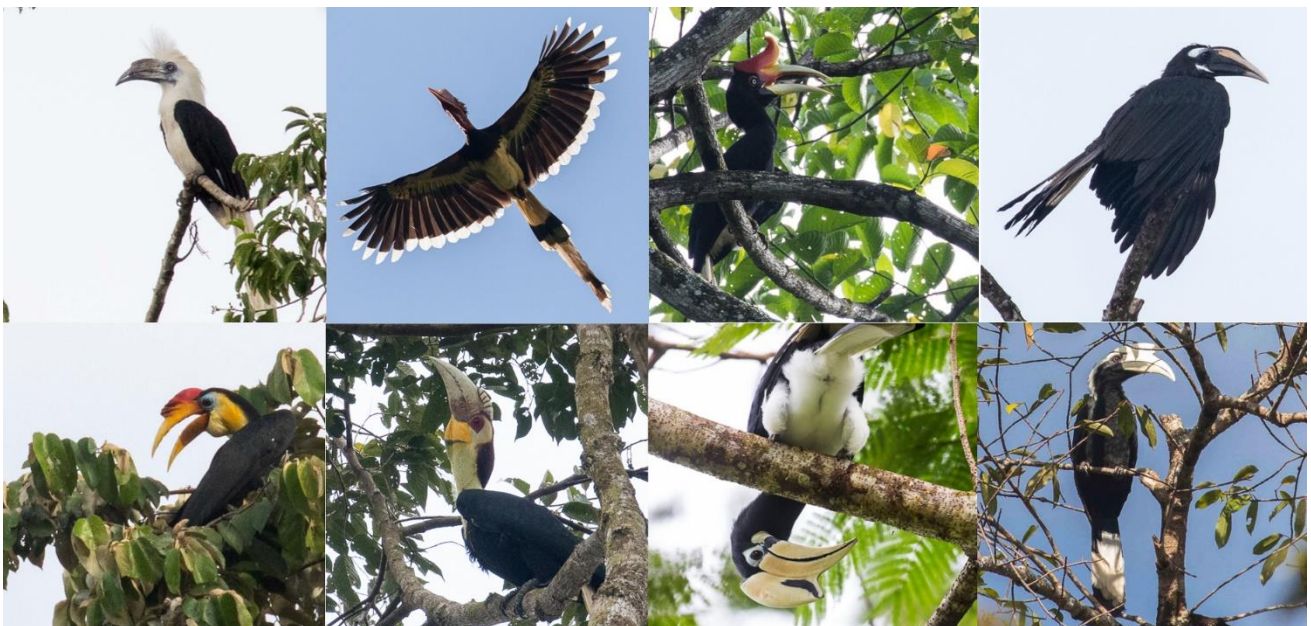
44. Greater Mouse Deer (*Tragulus napu*): Common at Danum and Deramakot, never could definitively ID a Lesser so I probably didn't see one.



45. Sambar (*Rusa unicolor*): A couple of them visited the Danum Valley Field Centre about every night, surprisingly hard to see during nightdrives.



And finally some birds that I'm just going to put here because they are certainly a lot better than any bats or rats :).



How about all hornbills of Borneo!



Bornean Ground Cuckoo, the elusive bird that follows Bearded Pigs around



Bornean Bristlehead, everyone's number one target species!



Paradise flying snake, because snakes are cool and this one has a prey.