

Trip to Natuna for Natuna langur (*presbytis natunae*) 17-24 September 2021

By Mark Spence



Mekar Jaya's finest: The Natuna Langur

A much-delayed trip to the Natuna islands in search of the endemic Natuna langur. I flew from Jakarta to Batam and stayed one night in Batam before taking the flight the following day. At the time of writing I believe there are between two to three flights from Batam to Natuna per week but they are a little prone to cancellation and rescheduling. I've been told it will be easier and cheaper to get there from 2022 onwards due to Super Air Jet starting a new bunch of flights to Ranai. I had three main areas I planned to visit, Gunung Ranai, Selat Lampa, and Mekar Jaya.

Natuna langur was the main target but was also hoping to have some luck with the Natuna slow loris (whose taxonomy seems a little confused), Natuna stink badger, Natuna small-toothed

palm civet, and whatever ever else I could find. On the contrary to the information I had found online stating otherwise, a couple of people I contacted in Natuna when planning previously aborted trips informed me the Natuna island tarsier was possible on the main island of Bunguran Besar. Upon arrival this was quickly shot down and I was told the tarsier was only possible on the island of Subi which can only be reached by a rather long and often postponed boat journey. Most of the info about the stink badger had its range in the North of the island but everyone I met in the west in Mekar Jaya seemed very familiar with its presence and although I never came across it, it didn't appear to all that hard to find from what I was told.



Mount Ranai was my first destination but unfortunately with it being a Friday no-one was going to be entering the forest. After a bit of discussion and a wasted day of being able to see the mountain but not being able to go there, I was set up with a local mouse-deer hunter who would take me on night time excursion to look for lorises, snakes, and whatever else we could find. We stayed mainly around the rubber plantations and various other types of farm, with a trip to the other side of the mountain to some spots where lorises are sometimes seen.

There was a considerable amount of colugo action with a few triple colugo trees but little else in the way of mammal action. A sunda scops owl, and a kuhl's flying gecko were the highlights. Snakes were very hard to come by with only a single bronzeback in Mekar Jaya being the only find despite a considerable amount of time searching. Everyone I asked said the same that snakes being fairly uncommon, just the odd python and mangrove cat snakes in the mangroves around Mekar Jaya. Later that night we got the eye-shine and flash of tail of Natuna small-

toothed palm civet (*Arctogalidia trivirgata inornata*). I was also hoping to come across the endemic Natuna sticky frog but no luck on that one.

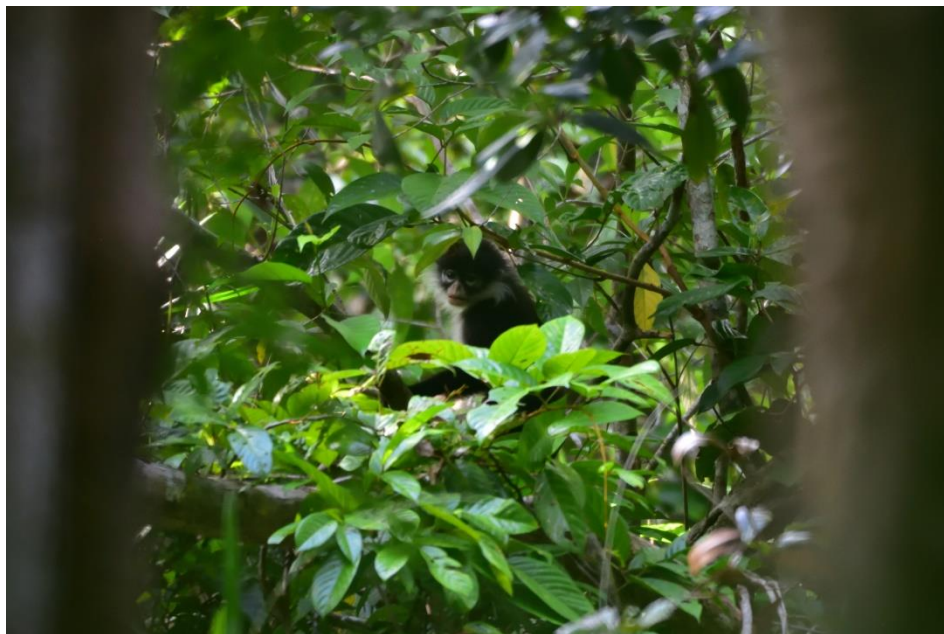


We agreed to meet again the next morning a little later than I had hoped at 8am. It was very hot in Natuna and almost everyone before and after had told me 5.00-7.00 was the only real period of activity for the langurs before they took refuge from the heat until early evening. This turned out not to matter anyway as the guy didn't turn up until after 10. The heat was pretty intense and we didn't enter langur habitat until nearly eleven at which time literally everything was hiding from the sun... except us as we started our trudge up the mountain. After a few hours of melting, the clouds came in and the heavens opened. We made our way slowly back down the mountain, a single giant squirrel being the only wildlife of any kind spotted, with the intention of making our way around the rubber plantations in the early evening as the langurs were said to frequent them around dusk. Unfortunately for reasons I never quite understood my companion departed at 3.30, so we missed both periods of langur activity and tramped up the mountain in the hottest part of the day. With the only member of the forestry team well-versed in langur locations nursing an injured leg and out of reach in his village with no signal, it was a rather frustrating first couple of days. Hafiz one of the guys from the forestry office very kindly offered to help with my search and tried his best but the langurs remained elusive.

It was at this point I decided to abandon the original plan and head straight for Mekar Jaya, where I was put in contact with Diani through Indonesian primatologist, Kasih Putri. Hafiz was awesome and took me on the incredibly scenic 90 minute bike ride to the village. Public

transport isn't really a thing going around Natuna. Things were about to get a whole lot better and a whole lot more langury. I don't have enough words to say how awesome Diani and Mekar Jaya are but I will get into that more later. Upon arrival Diani immediately suggested we head to the forest and scout the areas where he and the villagers frequently encountered the langurs. Diani had done an impressive amount of research and had a detailed knowledge of the different groups and ranges. Over the next few days I believe we encountered six of the eight groups, the largest compromising of over 20 individuals.

On the first day we located one group after only a few hours of searching, the machine gun alarm call that gives them their local name 'kekah' suddenly bursting out, followed by the crash of branches, and the flash of bodies as they disappeared deeper into the forest. I was initially surprised by how black the fur on most of their body was, quite a startling contrast to the white on their front. We tried to circle around, follow directly, and wait for them to return, over the next couple of hours before eventually giving up just before dusk to try some of the other known roosting spots. No luck in the usual haunts but an encouraging amount of 'they were around earlier' reports from the locals. Diani did a fantastic job of getting the community on board with our efforts, with the initial bemusement quickly replaced with non-stop reports of langur activity.



First night in Mekar Jaya we decided to head out to try our look for slow loris. We jumped on the bikes and headed back out towards the entrance to the village before eventually getting off

and entering the forest. My expectations were not too high, only ever having seen a photo of the Natuna loris in a cage in an animal market, but in less than half an hour we were eyeball to eyeball with a Natuna loris. Initially high up in a Petai tree, he scuttled away sharpish lower down. And luck would have it after about 15 minutes of the thorniest and stabbiest loris-searching ever we found him again lower down, just taking it all in.

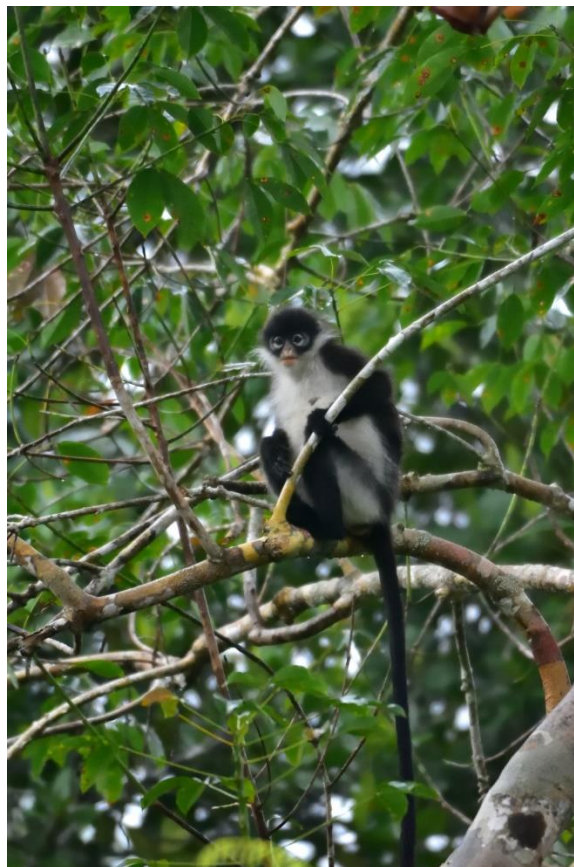


A group of sleeping long-tailed macaques quickly followed before we reached the edge of the forest and the start of the mangroves. A domestic cat that for quite some time looked for all the world a palm civet was the only other mammalian action before we turned in for the night.

The next morning we headed back out around 5.00am and decided to stake out one of the spots some of the villagers said was guaranteed to be a hive of langur activity before 6.00. Unfortunately as is usually the case langurs do what langurs want and decided to no show. We drove to the far end of the village scouting the main spots as we went until we got there. When we arrived the villagers told us there was one up the hill behind their house and sure enough there he was. A lone male who was insanely shy. We watched him from a distance eating in the early morning mist for a good while before deciding to attempt to venture closer. I don't think I had even made the first step before he fled in the most excessive manner possible, not even stopping for a glance before disappearing down into the mangroves. Naturally when we returned to spot first spot, we were informed it had been langur central moments after we had moved on. We then spent the rest of the day doing laps of the trails and main road that runs

through the village, only stopping to go back to Diani's house for an endless supply of coconuts and the most amazing food I think I've ever had on a monkey-stalking trip anywhere. Food is not something that I really bother to mention when reporting trips but the food in Mekar Jaya cooked by Diani's wife is ridiculously good. Endless crab and amazing sauces.

We had glorious sightings of a juvenile and a male late in the afternoon that day just as the rain was starting that were about as perfect as it could get. We met them not far from Diani's house about 40 metres down the track to the mangroves opposite the small house. Incredibly happy we went back for more celebratory crab and coconuts before heading out again that night to look for civets and other nocturnal wildlife. We were joined by 3 other local people who helped spotlight. A distant mouse deer spotted by Diani, and an uncountable number of colugos were the main things spotted. A civet which ran across the track and disappeared into the bushes was seen by everyone but me as I was being a doofus taking pictures of a spider. That night we decided to make a concerted effort to get a good look at the civet. Diani asked around and sure enough a couple of the villagers earmarked one particular massive tree on the way back out of the village as the local civet hotspot. Within a minute or so two Natuna small-toothed civets made an appearance but quickly disappeared into neighboring trees.



Next morning we went out again early and it was raining. Natuna langurs. Every spot we hit that morning provided Natuna langurs. Diani had the magic touch that day, every time we were about to leave the alarm call would start and the langurs would reveal their presence. Late afternoon we saw a solitary langur hanging out with a group of long-tailed macaques near the mangroves. He seemed pretty relaxed and part of the group and disappeared along with the group of macaques as they started alarm calling and branch shaking. Diani said it is behavior he was observed a few times. A note for any birders, Natuna serpent eagles were fairly common, with multiple being seen in Mekar Jaya and later in Batu Naga near Ranai. Pied hornbills were everywhere too.

At night we returned to the civet tree in hopes they had returned and sure enough before we even got off the bike there was a Natuna small-toothed civet staring down from almost exactly the same spot it had been last night. It was more accommodating this time and posed for a while before we moved on. It was quite odd going to sleep that night hearing the alarm calls of the Natuna langur ringing out in the dark about 50 metres away from Diani's porch. Before I had arrived in Mekar Jaya someone had referred to Mekar Jaya as the 'kingdom of kekah' and going to bed that night it would be hard to disagree!



The next morning we went to the spot we had heard the calls the previous night and were treated to the best views yet. The heavy rain and misty morning seemed to make the langurs lethargic and we got to spend a good hour with them as the sun came up and they woke up, stretched, scratched, groomed, and fed.



After that I had to return to Ranai to do PCR stuff and prepare for my return flight. Diani kindly offered to take me back and got in touch with a whole host of people in Ranai to see if we could encounter anymore langurs before I left. We tried a few locations, one being Batu Naga which had all the crested serpent eagles and an insane amount of squirrels. As something of a squirrel philistine I am unsure what most of them were but there were a lot of giant squirrels. The giant squirrels are a pale brown which is a coloration I haven't seen before anywhere else in Indonesia.

Our efforts were hampered somewhat by the rain and we were unable to locate any langurs around Ranai. Ranai is a nice place to stay with lots of food options and decent hotels and a stunning view of the iconic mount Ranai and very close to the airport.

Malay civets are fairly common I was informed, often coming around the chicken cages behind the houses in Mekar Jaya at night. Pangolins used to be fairly regularly spotted in Mekar Jaya but like most places not anymore. There were also rats in the mangroves I didn't identify. Diani took me on his boat for a tour of the mangroves one afternoon with the local crocodile shaman looking for crocs and found a decent sized croc and a bunch of birds.

I was originally planning to visit Natuna between April and June, which is when the rambutan trees fruit and the langurs become a bit bolder and more likely to hang around for extended views. If you are planning to go then this is the best time but I went in September when rainy season had started and still managed to see multiple langurs every day in Mekar Jaya. Diani is the man to contact about visiting Natuna and is currently battling to raise awareness about the increasingly precarious plight of the Natuna langur. He is looking to get eco-tourism off the ground in Natuna and is genuinely one of the best guides and people I have met on my travels

in Indonesia. He could not have done any more than he did and I could not recommend him enough. Contact him on +6282284129248