

BIRDING HOTSPOT

Belum-Temengor Forest Complex, north peninsular Malaysia

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Background

The Belum-Temengor Forest Complex (BTFC), situated in Perak state, north peninsular Malaysia, consists of the Royal Belum State Park and the Belum and Temengor Forest Reserves. On its northern boundary, BTFC is contiguous with both the Hala-Bala Wildlife Sanctuary and the Bang Lang National Park in southern Thailand. This vast trans-boundary wilderness area, with elevations ranging from 130–1,500 m, consists of mainly Sundaic lowland and hill dipterocarp forest.

Encompassing some 266,000 ha, BTFC was for many decades under a state of emergency due to the presence of communist insurgents. This kept the forest relatively free from exploitation and its wildlife undisturbed. In the 1970s, two major developments brought changes to this enforced isolation. One was the 1975 construction of the East–West Highway, a strategic defence plan

against the insurgents. This 124 km road cuts across BTFC, dividing what was essentially a single area into two parts, Belum in the north and Temengor in the south. The other development was the completion of the Temengor Dam in 1977, which drowned pristine forests and created the 18,000 ha Temengor Lake, with its numerous islands that were formerly hill-tops. In 1989, the government and the communists signed a peace treaty, ending hostilities and paving the way for the opening up of BTFC for logging, agriculture and tourism.

The forests have long been known to provide shelter to a great biological diversity. Many globally threatened species of flora and fauna have been recorded and the area remains one of the last refuges in north peninsular Malaysia for large mammals such as Asian Elephant *Elephas maximus*, Sumatran Rhinoceros *Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*, Malayan Sun Bear *Ursus malayanus*,

Plate 1. Landscape Forest, Belum Temengot, Malaysia, February 2004.



Malayan Tiger *Panthera tigris* and Gaur *Bos gaurus*. This forest habitat is also home to some 5,000 indigenous Jahai and Temiar people who make a living from hunting, collecting forest produce and tourism.

Scientific expeditions carried out by the Malaysian Nature Society (MNS) in 1993/94 and 1998 confirmed the conservation importance of BTFC and led to the MNS and other organisations

campaigning for its protection. In 2007, upper Belum received legal protection with the establishment of the 117,500 ha Royal Belum State Park. MNS is continuing its advocacy for the remaining sections of BTFC to be incorporated into this new park. A fully protected BTFC would create a single large trans-boundary protected area spanning southern Thailand and northern peninsular Malaysia.



Plate 2. Plain-pouched Hornbills *Aceros subruficollis*, Belum Temengor, July 2008.

Plate 3. Plain-pouched Hornbills *Aceros subruficollis*, Belum Temengot, August 2004.





Plate 4. Wrinkled Hornbill *Aceros corrugatus*, Belum Temengor, Malaysia, June 2008.

Birds

Some 316 bird species, many of which are restricted to the Sundaic lowland and montane forests, have so far been recorded in BTFC. These include eight species listed as Vulnerable: Mountain Peacock Pheasant *Polyplectron inopinatum*, Wallace's Hawk Eagle *Spizaetus nanus*, Masked Finfoot *Heliopais personata*, Large Green Pigeon *Treron capellei*, Short-toed Coucal *Centropus rectunguis*, Blue-banded Kingfisher *Alcedo euryzona*, Plain-pouched Hornbill *Aceros subruficollis* and Straw-headed Bulbul *Pycnonotus zeylanicus*. In addition, some 56 other species (Appendix 1) are considered Near Threatened. The area is of outstanding importance for threatened Sundaic forest birds, and this high avifaunal diversity, coupled with the large number threatened species, has led to the MNS declaring BTFC one of the 55 Important Bird Areas (IBA) in Malaysia.

The over-riding importance of BTFC, however, lies in the fact that its forests are home to large numbers of hornbills. The MNS expeditions discovered spectacular mass flights of Plain-pouched Hornbill, with hundreds of birds making dawn and evening flights at certain times of the year. Besides this species, BTFC also supports nine other hornbill species, six of which are Near

Threatened (Rhinoceros Hornbill *Buceros rhinoceros*, Great Hornbill *B. bicornis*, Helmeted Hornbill *Rhinoplax vigil*, White-crowned Hornbill *Aceros comatus*, Wrinkled Hornbill *A. corrugatus* and Black Hornbill *Anthracoceros malayanus*). BTFC is the only site where all 10 species of Malaysian hornbills can be found.

Logistics

The gateway to BTFC is Grik (or Gerik), a busy town located at the western end of the East–West Highway. Grik is easily reached by public transport and is where you stock up on supplies and obtain the required permits for the Royal Belum State Park. However, there is no public transport from Grik to Banding Island, the main tourist centre for BTFC. If you do not have your own transport, there is a private van that operates an irregular shuttle service on this 40 km route. The East–West Highway passes through Banding Island, which has a range of accommodation and a public jetty. Pre-booked tour packages that take care of all arrangements are available at the upmarket Banding Rainforest Resort. There are no passable roads in BTFC; the only access is via Temengor Lake using motorboats (Figure 1).

The Royal Belum State Park, at the time of writing, is rather difficult to visit. This part of BTFC

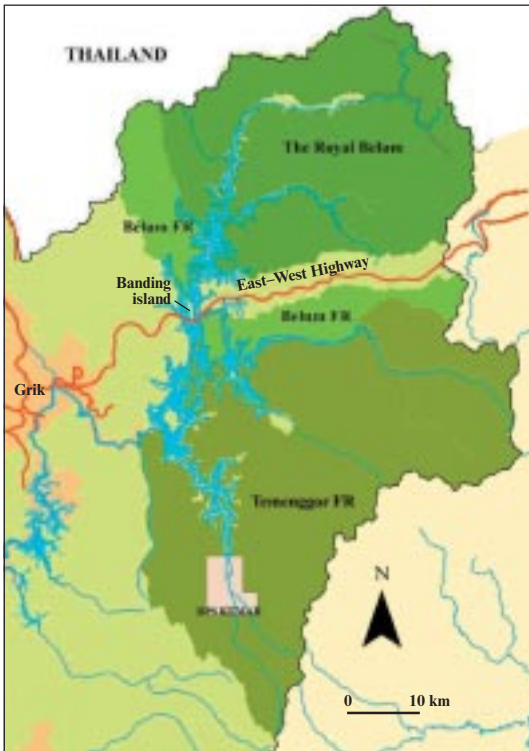


Figure 1. Map of the Belum-Temengor Forest Complex.

Plate 5. Blyth's Hawk Eagle *Spizaetus alboniger*, Malaysia, June 2008.



is still a sensitive area. In order to enter, park permits as well as security passes are required; these take several days to process. The park lacks adequate visitor facilities and there are few trails. However, the main visitor area at Kejar River has tent sites and basic toilets and baths. A guide is mandatory and you have to bring in your own food. Most visitors wanting to experience BTFC just opt for a day trip into the Temengor part. For a negotiable fee, boat operators will take you to visit a Jahai village and a saltlick and go on a jungle trek to see the rare *Rafflesia* flower. You can do some birding on such trips. There are also a few houseboats anchored around the lake that cater for overnight visitors to Temengor. The more intrepid visitor can opt to stay in a Jahai village.

Birdwatching

About 100 of the bird species in BTFC are restricted to Sundaic lowland forest. Although the East-West Highway splits BTFC into two parts, in reality it is one ecosystem, with both areas having similar habitats and bird populations. For those who do not have the time or budget to bird in the Royal Belum State Park, it is possible to enjoy birding in the Temengor area. A good part of the scenic East-West Highway passes through forest, and you can

Plate 6. Black-thighed Falconets *Microhierax fringillarius*, Malaysia, March 2002.



stop at suitable spots to scan the valleys for birds or to do some roadside birding. There are a few picnic areas and rest stops where you can bird in the vicinity, for example at the Viewpoint (1,000 m), the highest point on the East–West Highway. Please note that Forestry Department permits are required to enter the forest. There is a real danger of encountering elephants. All large mammals can be dangerous, so for your personal safety stay close to your vehicle.

From vantage points along the road, check the dead trees for the handsome Blyth's Hawk Eagle *Spizaetus alboniger* or the tiny Black-thighed Falconet *Microhierax fringillarius*. Look out also for over-flying Blue-rumped Parrot *Psittinus cyanurus* and Blue-crowned Hanging Parrot *Loriculus galgulus*—these two species often call in flight. BTFC is rich in fruit trees, and chancing upon a fruiting fig tree means a potential birding bonanza. Besides hornbills, fruiting trees attract other frugivores such as green pigeons, barbets, leafbirds and bulbuls. This IBA has a healthy population of Large Green Pigeon, and flocks of up to 60 birds are not uncommon. Five species of barbet have been recorded including Red-crowned Barbet *Megalaima rafflesii* and Red-throated Barbet *M. mystacophanos*. Bulbuls are well represented, with 20 of the 26 Malaysian species

occurring. The rare Straw-headed Bulbul can sometimes be heard vocalising its rich, bubbly calls from the lakeside forest edge.

The Sunda region is well known for babblers and BTFC is no exception, with at least 30 species present. Among those you are likely to encounter are Chestnut-winged Babbler *Stachyris erythroptera*, Chestnut-rumped Babbler *S. maculata*, Fluffy-backed Tit Babbler *Macronous ptilosus*, Sooty-capped Babbler *Malacopteron affine*, Short-tailed Babbler *Malacocincla malaccensis* and Brown Fulvetta *Alcippe brunneicauda*. Other closed-forest species that are easily seen include Black-and-Yellow Broadbill *Eurylaimus ochromalus*, Green Broadbill *Calyptomena viridis* and Dark-throated Oriole *Oriolus xanthonotus*.

Temengor Lake has few waterbirds, with only the usual egrets and herons being seen occasionally. However, its fish are food for several piscivores. The Lesser Fish Eagle *Ichthyophaga humilis* is widespread and in winter is joined by Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*. Several species of kingfisher occur: along the secluded rivers draining into the lake, you can see Blue-eared Kingfisher *Alcedo meninting* and sometimes Blue-banded Kingfisher. For the lovely Chestnut-naped Forktail *Enicurus ruficapillus* search the smaller streams.

Plate 7. Yellow-crowned Barbet *Megalaima henrici*, Malaysia, February 2004.



Plate 8. Fluffy-backed Tit Babbler *Macronous ptilosus*, Malaysia, February 2004.





Plate 9. Scarlet-rumped Trogon *Harpactes duvaucelii*, Malaysia, March 2003.

Plate 10. Red-bearded Bee-eater *Nyctyornis amictus*, Malaysia, September 2005.



Most of the local tour operators know that hornbills, especially Plain-pouched, are a big draw in BTFC and they will try to show visitors these birds. The best time for the mass flights of Plain-pouched Hornbill is from August to October, when the birds congregate and move south into Temengor. During these months, flocks fly out at dawn heading north to feed and return south in the evening to as yet undiscovered roost sites, deep in Temengor. The best places to witness these spectacular sights are Tebang and Chiong villages for dawn flights and Kiroi River for the evening flights. The MNS Hornbill Volunteer Programme, which monitors these flights, estimates that the total population is about 3,000 birds.

Conservation

A large part of BTFC, including lower Belum and the whole of Temengor, remains unprotected. Timber extraction is the main threat to this part of BTFC, which is classified as production forest. Logging targets the large, old trees, which are the prime nesting trees for hornbills. Additionally, logging operations threaten the survival of fruit trees, especially figs which are the main food source of these charismatic birds. Recognising the importance and value of Belum-Temengor, in 2004 MNS embarked on a long-term conservation programme using hornbills as the flagship species. The project, involving hornbill research, education and awareness activities and advocacy, aims for greater and more comprehensive protection for the whole Belum-Temengor Forest Complex.

Plate 11. Logging boat, Belum Temengor, Malaysia, August 2004.



Acknowledgements

I thank the Malaysian Nature Society for the opportunity to experience the Belum-Temengor Forest Complex. Thanks also go to Yeap Chin Aik and Kanitha Krishnasamy for commenting on the manuscript.

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Appendix 1. The Near Threatened bird species of the Belum-Temengor Forest Complex.

Common name	Scientific name	Common name	Scientific name
Crested Partridge	<i>Rollulus rouloul</i>	Lesser Green Leafbird	<i>Chloropsis cyanopogon</i>
Ferruginous Partridge	<i>Caloperdix ocella</i>	Fiery Minivet	<i>Pericrocotus igneus</i>
Great Argus	<i>Argusianus argus</i>	Dark-throated Oriole	<i>Oriolus xanthonotus</i>
Lesser Fish Eagle	<i>Ichthyophaga humilis</i>	Crested Jay	<i>Platylophus galericulatus</i>
Grey-headed Fish Eagle	<i>Ichthyophaga ichthyaetus</i>	Black Magpie	<i>Platysmurus leucopterus</i>
Blue-rumped Parrot	<i>Psittinus cyanurus</i>	Scaly-breasted Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus squamatus</i>
Black-bellied Malkoha	<i>Phaenicophaeus diardi</i>	Grey-bellied Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus cyaniventris</i>
Chestnut-bellied Malkoha	<i>Phaenicophaeus sumatranus</i>	Puff-backed Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus eutilotis</i>
Red-naped Trogon	<i>Harpactes kasumba</i>	Finsch's Bulbul	<i>Alophoixus finschii</i>
Diard's Trogon	<i>Harpactes diardii</i>	Buff-vented Bulbul	<i>Iole olivacea</i>
Scarlet-rumped Trogon	<i>Harpactes duvaucelii</i>	Streaked Bulbul	<i>Ixos malaccensis</i>
Rufous-collared Kingfisher	<i>Actenoides concretus</i>	Rail-babbler	<i>Eupetes macrocerus</i>
White-crowned Hornbill	<i>Aceros comatus</i>	Short-tailed Scimitar Babbler	<i>Malacocincla malaccensis</i>
Wrinkled Hornbill	<i>Aceros corrugatus</i>	White-chested Babbler	<i>Trichastoma rostratum</i>
Black Hornbill	<i>Anthracoseros malayanus</i>	Sooty-capped Babbler	<i>Malacopteron affine</i>
Rhinoceros Hornbill	<i>Buceros rhinoceros</i>	Rufous-crowned Babbler	<i>Malacopteron magnum</i>
Great Hornbill	<i>Buceros bicornis</i>	Striped Wren Babbler	<i>Kenopia striata</i>
Helmeted Hornbill	<i>Rhinoplax vigil</i>	Large Wren Babbler	<i>Napothera macrodactyla</i>
Red-crowned Barbet	<i>Megalaima rafflesii</i>	Chestnut-rumped Babbler	<i>Stachyris maculata</i>
Red-throated Barbet	<i>Megalaima mystacophanos</i>	White-necked Babbler	<i>Stachyris leucotis</i>
Yellow-crowned Barbet	<i>Megalaima henrici</i>	Black-throated Babbler	<i>Stachyris nigricollis</i>
Malaysian Honeyguide	<i>Indicator archipelagicus</i>	Fluffy-backed Tit Babbler	<i>Macronous ptilosus</i>
Buff-necked Woodpecker	<i>Meiglyptes tukki</i>	Brown Fulvetta	<i>Alcippe brunneicauda</i>
Olive-backed Woodpecker	<i>Dinopium rafflesii</i>	Rufous-tailed Shama	<i>Trichixos pyrropyga</i>
Black-and-Yellow Broadbill	<i>Eurylaimus ochromalus</i>	Chestnut-naped Forktail	<i>Enicurus ruficapillus</i>
Green Broadbill	<i>Calyptomena viridis</i>	Grey-chested Jungle Flycatcher	<i>Rhinomyias umbratilis</i>
Garnet Pitta	<i>Pitta granatina</i>	Rufous-chested Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula dumetoria</i>
Maroon-breasted Philentoma	<i>Philentoma velatum</i>	Green Iora	<i>Aegithina viridissima</i>