

## LITTLE-KNOWN AREA

# Sarawak—a neglected birding destination in Malaysia

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## Introduction

One of the ironies of birding in Asia is that despite the fact that Malaysia is one of the most popular destinations for birdwatchers visiting the region, very few visit the largest state in the country. Peninsular Malaysia, and the state of Sabah in east Malaysia, are well-known and are visited several times a year by international bird tour operators as well as by many independent birdwatchers. But Malaysia's largest state, Sarawak, which sits between the two and occupies one fifth of eastern Borneo, is unfortunately often overlooked by birdwatchers. The lack of attention given to Sarawak is not only a loss for birders, but also to the state, as the revenue that overseas birdwatchers bring in can be a powerful stimulus for protecting forests, wetlands and other important bird habitats. It is unfortunate that this attention, and the probable conservation benefits it could bring, is not afforded to the largest state in the country.

It is our hope that this article will be a catalyst for change. Although much of Sarawak has been logged and developed, the state still contains extensive tracts of rainforest habitat; it is still one of the least developed states in Malaysia once away from the four main coastal cities. Given its extensive coastline, Sarawak contains excellent wintering grounds for waders and other waterbirds. BirdLife International has designated 22 Important Bird Areas (IBAs) in Sarawak, the highest number for any state in Malaysia and more than in all the states of west Malaysia combined (18), whilst Sabah has 15 IBAs (Yeap *et al.* 2007).

## Why do birders neglect Sarawak?

That Sarawak is neglected is clear from an examination of the itineraries offered by major bird tour companies. Most confine themselves to Sabah, visiting the well-known sites of Mt Kinabalu, Crocker Range, Danum Valley, Kinabatangan River and Sepilok, often coupled

**Plate 1.** Dawn over Kalimantan from look-out point at Gn Penrissen, Sarawak, March 2009.



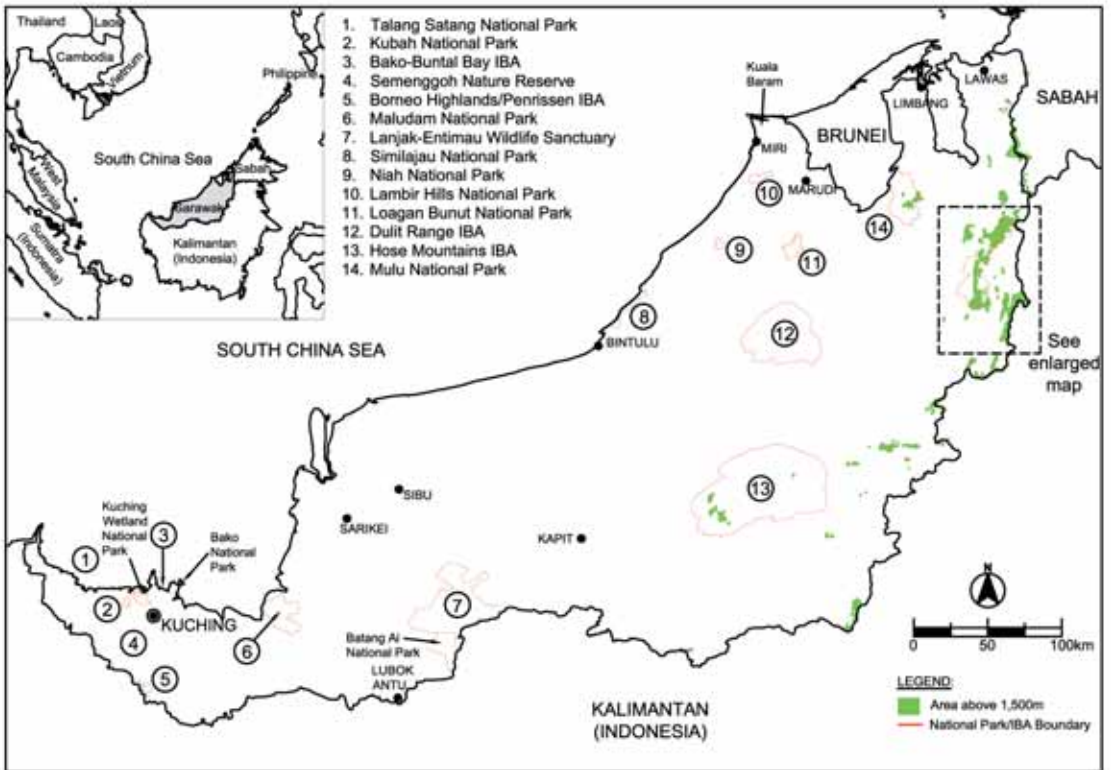
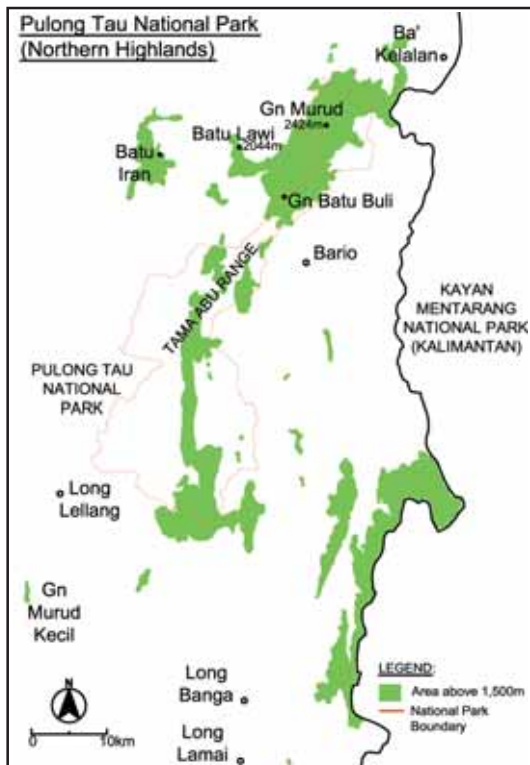


Figure 1. A (above) Main national parks and Important Bird Areas of Sarawak ; B (below) Inset showing Pulong Tau National Park and surrounding area.



with a visit to sites in west Malaysia. Sabah certainly offers some distinct advantages to birdwatchers in Borneo, including a well-developed infrastructure of lodges, trails and canopy walkways. Most of the highland endemics in Borneo can be easily seen in the north-east of the island, and the highest mountain, Mt Kinabalu, is easy to reach and has excellent facilities. Sabah has even instituted the Borneo Birding Festival, now in its second year.

Sarawak, on the other hand, has made practically no institutional effort to attract birders. Some of its national parks, Mulu in particular, have good visitor facilities and broad, well-maintained trails. However, several tantalising localities in the state including Lanjak-Entimau Wildlife Sanctuary, the largest protected area in Sarawak, and the turtle breeding islands of Talang Talang, possibly the last known locality for the Silvery Pigeon *Columba argentina*, are off limits to casual visitors without (difficult-to-get) permits.

Some of the most interesting potential localities outside protected areas, especially Gn Dulit, home to three of Borneo's least-known endemics, remain practically unexplored in modern times. The very size of the state may make it somewhat intimidating for a visitor planning a short trip and wanting to minimise time spent travelling. Birding information is hard to come by; the birding in the only



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**Plate 2.** Adult Bornean Barbet *Megalaima eximia*, Rafflesia Reserve, Tambunan, Sabah, May 2009.

online checklist of Sarawak birds (Gregory-Smith 1999) largely dates from 1994–1996. Although there is an active core of local birders, including contributors of valuable sightings to Bird I-Witness ([www.worldbirds.org/v3/malaysia.php](http://www.worldbirds.org/v3/malaysia.php)), there are few professional birding guides available to lead a visitor to the best spots.

Sarawak offers distinct possibilities for the adventurous with plenty of time and for anyone looking to help spread the word about the conservation benefits birding tourism can bring, there is no better place in Malaysia.

### Sarawak specialities

By no means all Borneo's endemic birds can be said to be readily found in Sabah. Sarawak offers an opportunity to see and, in some cases, to help locate/rediscover a number of species few have encountered. One of the islands most interesting endemics, the aptly named Pygmy White-eye *Oculocincta squamifrons*, is surely easier to see in the mountains of Sarawak, at sites such as Ba' Kelalan and Borneo Highlands Resort, than at any other site in Malaysian Borneo. The following list gives details of a number of birds that visitors to Sarawak should look for, including species more likely to be found in Sarawak than in Sabah, even if finding some of them may require a bit of an expedition!



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**Plate 3.** Immature Bornean Barbet *Megalaima eximia*, Rafflesia Reserve, Tambunan, Sabah, May 2009.

### Dulit (Hose's) Partridge *Rhizothera dulitensis*

This species, apparently unrecorded since 1937, remains practically unknown; although two specimens were collected by Everett on Mt Kinabalu in 1895, it has not been recorded in Sabah since (Davison 1999, 2005, 2008). Long considered a race of the Long-billed Partridge *R. longirostris* the relationship with the latter remains in some doubt (Davison 2008). It may ultimately prove to be a Sarawak near-endemic. In Sarawak it is known only from Gn Dulit, Gn Murud and Gn Batu Song (Smythies 1999). It may be under serious threat from habitat degradation and hunting, and its rediscovery is an important conservation priority.

### Chinese Egret *Egretta eulophotes*

This globally Vulnerable species winters along the northern coast of Borneo, with known localities in Sabah, Sarawak and Brunei. Significant numbers winter in the Bako-Buntal Bay IBA in the estuary of the Sarawak River, possibly the largest concentration of the species in Borneo (BirdLife International 2009a), with a high count of 107 recorded in 2007 (AW pers. obs.). Roosting birds can be easily seen from Buntal between September and April. They are often the most common egret species at Buntal.



**Plate 4.** Hose's Broadbill *Calyptomena hosii*, Poring Hot Springs, Sabah, October 2008.

#### **Nordmann's Greenshank *Tringa guttifer***

This rare migrant shorebird species is wholly restricted to the East Asian–Australasian Flyway. It can be regularly seen at the Bako-Buntal Bay IBA, with a high count of 12 (> 1% of the estimated world population) recorded in 2009.

#### **Silvery Pigeon *Columba argentina***

There is an unconfirmed sight record of a bird seen among a flock of 10–15 Pied Imperial Pigeon *Ducula bicolor* on Pulau Talang Besar in September 2001 (Wilson 2004). This species used to breed in large numbers with Pied Imperial Pigeon on Pulau Burong off the estuary of the Batang Lupar. RO visited the island in June 2006 but did not see the species, though Pied Imperial Pigeons were common. Visiting the Talang Talang islands requires a permit. However, Pied Imperial Pigeons, possibly crossing from these or nearby islands, are commonly seen flying inland over the coast west of Lundu, and visitors to the area should examine such birds carefully. Information on the identification of this species is available from Yong (2009).

#### **Dulit Frogmouth *Batrachostomus harterti***

This is a globally Near Threatened, little-known and very localised Sarawak near-endemic, with only a few apparently unconfirmed records from Sabah

and Kalimantan. Apparently only eight specimens are known (BirdLife International 2009b). In addition to Gn Dulit, it has been recorded at about 300 m elevation on the Usun Apau Plateau and the Kelabit Uplands (Mann 2008); the species was also recorded near the Kelabit Highlands in 2009 and at Long Lellang in 2010 (JE pers. obs.). Care should be taken in identifying all frogmouths in this area, as the Large Frogmouth *B. auritus* (also Near Threatened) apparently replaces it at lower elevations and may not be distinguishable on plumage alone (B. King pers. comm.). A photograph by John Arifin, presumably of this species, taken in Sarawak in April 2009, has been posted on the internet ([www.johnarifin.com](http://www.johnarifin.com)); the bird was seen at 1,000 m and responded to a playback of the only known recording (J. Arifin pers. comm.).

#### **Waterfall Swift *Hydrochous gigas***

This is a poorly known montane globally Near Threatened species. In addition to the localities mentioned in Mann (2008), both RO and DB—on separate occasions—have seen large swiftlets, possibly of this species, flying among other swiftlets over the Borneo Highlands Resort. JE also noted a flock at Ba' Kelalan.

#### **Bornean Barbet *Megalaima eximia***

Although Mann (2008) regards this endemic species as 'uncommon', it is one of the commoner barbets at the Borneo Highlands Resort. This locality may be one of the easiest places to see the species.

#### **Hose's Broadbill *Calyptomena hosii***

This extremely attractive endemic species is probably easier to see in the Kelabit Highlands than in its known localities in Sabah. Ben King found it

**Plate 5.** Waterfall Trail, Kubah NP, Sarawak, March 2009.



‘fairly common’ there in 2004. YST and Daniel Kong (DK) have confirmed this since. It has also been recorded at Long Lellang, and in the Lanjak-Entimau Wildlife Sanctuary, where it is reported to be fairly common (Rautner *et al.* 2005), with the most recent record by DK in 2009.

#### Blue-banded Pitta *Pitta arquata*

Another magnificent endemic, this shy species has been recently recorded at Long Lellang (JE), Borneo Highlands (along the paved road leading to the observation point) and Kubah NP (DB, RO, YST). Both of the latter destinations are easily accessible from Kuching.

#### Fairy Pitta *Pitta nympha*

This species, whose wintering range is poorly known, may be easier to see in Sarawak than anywhere else in South-East Asia. There are records from the Matang Wildlife Centre near Kubah NP from 2007 and 2010 (YST), with a clear photographic record from Lanjak-Entimau Wildlife Sanctuary taken in February 2009 (Lily Kokong pers. comm.).

#### Black Oriole *Oriolus hosii*

This may be Sarawak’s number one mystery bird. According to Mann (2008) there are no definite

**Plate 6.** Blue-banded Pitta *Pitta arquata*, Danum Valley, Sabah, October 2008.



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**Plate 7.** Fairy Pitta *Pitta nympha*, Lanjak-Entimau Wildlife Sanctuary, Sarawak, February 2009.

records for Sabah, although there are some possible sightings. In Sarawak, it has been recorded in the past at Gn Kalulong, Gn Mulu, Gn Dulit, the Usun Apau Plateau, Gn Derian, Gn Murud Kecil, Batang Patap, Ulu Sabai and Tutoh (Mann 2008). Mann cites no records more recent than 1991, when the species was seen at Deer Cave in Gn Mulu NP. Mann’s most recent records for the species (2003 and 2004) are from Kayan Mentarang NP in east Kalimantan, near the Sarawak border. In Sarawak, Ben King and Dennis Yong failed to find it in the Kelabit Highlands in 2004 (B. King pers. comm.), although the area borders Kayan Mentarang and there is no reason why the species should not occur given the presence of extensive suitable habitat. JE also failed to find it in January 2010 at Long Lellang or Ba’ Kelalan. However, an International Tropical Timber Organisation (ITTO) project team has recently reported sighting this elusive bird during a survey of Batu Lawi (a five-hour journey by four-wheel-drive vehicle from Lawas) (W. Cluny pers. comm.).

BirdLife International, which lists the species as Near Threatened, notes that it is ‘apparently restricted to mossy transitional forest around 1,100–1,200 m on the sandy north side of the Dulit range’ (BirdLife International 2009c). Unlike highly cryptic species such as the Dulit Partridge and Dulit Frogmouth, orioles are normally noisy birds and are not particularly difficult to find where they occur, so the paucity of records for this species suggests that it is genuinely extremely local or rare. Obtaining a true picture of the distribution and abundance of the Black Oriole should be a major goal for adventurous birdwatchers visiting the state.

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**Plate 8.** White-necked Babbler *Stachyris leucotis*, Poring Hot Springs, Sabah, October 2008.

**White-necked Babbler *Stachyris leucotis***

This ‘very uncommon lowland and submontane resident’ (Mann 2008), was recorded by JE at Long Lellang in 2010 when several individuals were seen. It has also been recorded by B. King near Bario. Sreedharan (2006) caught two breeding birds at Camp 5 in Pulong Tau NP in 1996. The species

**Plate 9.** Bornean Blue Flycatcher *Cyornis superbus*, Bintulu, Sarawak, January 2007.



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seems to have a preference for slopes at 500–900 m in primary forest, unlike peninsular Malaysia where it is largely confined to lowland forest.

**Bornean Blue Flycatcher *Cyornis superbus***

This ‘sparsely distributed’ species (Mann 2008) has been recorded by JE at Long Lellang; a breeding female was caught at Camp 5 in Pulong Tau NP in 1996 (Sreedharan 2006). It has also been found in Kubah NP and Borneo Highlands.

**Large-billed Blue Flycatcher *Cyornis caerulatus***

This ‘uncommon to rare’ lowland resident (Mann 2008), listed as Vulnerable by BirdLife International (2009d), has been recorded by JE at Long Lellang. It also occurs in Kubah NP where it is scarcer than the previous species.

**Hook-billed Bulbul *Setornis criniger***

This globally Vulnerable species, otherwise found only on Sumatra, is one of the least known bulbul species on Borneo and seldom recorded by birdwatchers on the usual birdwatching circuits owing to the lack of its preferred habitat. It is a specialist of stunted forest types—peatswamp and heath forest up to 1,000 m—both of which have been severely reduced by deforestation and fires. Although it is probably most easily seen in parts of

**Plate 10.** Hook-billed Bulbul *Setornis criniger*, Sungai Binyo, Bintulu, Sarawak, August 2006.



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**Plates 11 and 12.** Pygmy White-eye *Oculocincta squamifrons*, Borneo Highlands Resort, Sarawak, March 2009.

west and south Kalimantan (Gn Palung, Tg Puting NP, Sebangau NP), Sarawak no doubt contains more accessible sites to find the species. It is known to occur in Maludam, Similajau and Loagan Bunut NPs.

#### **Bornean Bristlehead *Pityriasis gymnocephala***

Although this sought-after species is probably easier to find in Sabah, it has been recorded at a number of localities in Sarawak including the Matang Wildlife Centre near Kubah NP, Kuching Wetland NP, Semilajau NP, Lambir Hills NP, Maludam NP and Gn Mulu NP as well as in areas of Brunei accessible by road from Miri.

#### **Pygmy White-eye *Oculocincta squamifrons***

As mentioned above, Borneo Highlands Resort may be one of the easiest places to find this often difficult species. Although Mann (2008) refers to it as 'very scarce', it appears to be common at this site. At the right time of year it may be seen, with a little patience, at fruiting trees near the entrance to the Indonesian border overlook point. It is also common at Ba' Kelalan (as well as at several localities in east Kalimantan).

#### **Birding sites**

This section summarises the most readily accessible of Sarawak's birding areas.

#### **Kuching and its environs**

Kuching, the capital of the state, is an excellent base for visiting a number of interesting areas in the surrounding countryside. Inside the city itself, there are areas of woodland within minutes of Kuching International Airport, where Javan Frogmouth *Batrachostomus javensis* and wintering Red-legged Crake *Rallina fasciata* may be found, as well as the

Western Tarsier *Tarsius bancanus* for the mammal-watchers. The delightfully old-fashioned Sarawak Museum, designed in the nineteenth century, boasts a collection of mounted specimens of many of Borneo's resident birds, some of them shrunk over the years to almost half their expected size. Kuching also provides access to the resort area around Gn Santubong, where boats can be hired to search for Irrawaddy Dolphin *Orcaella brevirostris* and to explore parts of Kuching Wetland NP.

From Kuching, roads lead in a variety of directions, and allow visits to coastal areas, lowland rainforest, and mid-mountain areas, and there are still plenty of places to explore. The Malaysian Nature Society (MNS), Kuching Branch Bird Group, organises regular excursions covering a variety of natural history interests, including surveys forming part of the Asian Waterbird Census.

The following localities are less than an hour's drive from Kuching, and are particularly worth visiting:

**Bako National Park** Although this 2,742 ha park is frequently visited and is close to Kuching, it cannot be reached directly by road. The Kuching–Bako road terminates at the village of Kampong Bako, 37 km from town; from there it is necessary to arrange transportation to park headquarters by boat, a 25-minute ride. The park headquarters can provide accommodation, though not food, and the open areas around the lodges attract extremely tame Bearded Pigs *Sus barbatus*. Sunda Colugo *Cynocephalus variegatus* roost in isolated trees near the headquarters, and a boardwalk leading east through the mangroves is an excellent place to see Proboscis Monkey *Nasalis larvatus* (Hazebroek & Kashim 2000).

This national park, although part of the Bako-Buntal Bay IBA, is not, perhaps, the best birding spot in the region. It is, however, particularly interesting botanically, and it is worth following the short Lintang Trail up to the sandstone plateau, an area of *kerangas* forest with pitcher plants and commensal ant plants (Treseder 1995).

**Borneo Highlands Resort** Borneo Highlands provides easy access to mid-mountain forest from 850 m at the plateau area, where the main facilities and the golf course are located, to about 1,300 m at

**Plate 13.** View over Kalimantan from look-out point at Gn Penrissen, Sarawak, March 2009.



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**Plate 14.** Narcissus Flycatcher *Ficedula narcissina*, Borneo Highlands Resort, Sarawak, March 2009.



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the summit in the upper portion of the Penrissen range. A paved road leads to a stunning view across the Kalimantan border at about 1,000 m, and to a forest trail following the border itself. The area offers the best opportunities in Borneo to find Bornean Barbet, Blue-banded Pitta and Pygmy White-eye (see above). The area is also good for wintering flycatchers, including Narcissus Flycatcher *Ficedula narcissina*, and may be the closest place to Kuching with a reasonable chance of seeing hornbills. Accommodation and food are available and excellent, but expensive unless you are accompanying members of the MNS Kuching Branch which is carrying out bird surveys on behalf of the owners. A Bird Race (the first for Borneo) organised jointly by the resort and MNS has been held in October since 2008, resulting in, among other things, the first sightings of White-crowned Hornbill *Aceros comatus* for the area. Borneo Highlands is only about one hour from Kuching, and drivers who do not wish to tackle the steep access road can reach the resort by shuttle.

**Buntal** This small fishing village near the mouth of the Sarawak River provides a view of part of the Bako-Buntal Bay IBA. During the rainy season, large numbers of wintering shorebirds can be seen. Some 55 species of waterbirds have been recorded in the area, with an estimated 20,000–25,000 shorebirds using the bay and its immediate environs, including Nordmann's Greenshank, Asian Dowitcher *Limnodromus semipalmatus* and Eastern Curlew *Numenius madagascariensis*; there are even historical records of Chinese Crested Tern *Sterna bernsteini*, the last in 1913 (Mann 2008). The first record for Borneo of Eurasian Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus* was here in 2006–2007, and the first Pied Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta* for Malaysia and Borneo was found here in January 2009 (see p.25). Malaysian Plover *Charadrius peronii* breeds in the area, and DB photographed the poorly known White-faced Plover *C. [alexandrinus] dealbatus* (Kennerley *et al.* 2008) here in 2009, apparently a first for Borneo. This is also an excellent locality for Chinese Egret (see above).

**Kubah National Park** This lowland/low-hill rainforest national park is a favourite spot for local birders. It is easily reached by road from Kuching, and comfortable lodging (but not food) is available. The paved road running from the park entrance can be quite productive, particularly the stretch between the entrance and the head of the Waterfall Trail. The road is good for such species as Scarlet-breasted Flowerpecker *Prionochilus thoracicus*. A well-marked frog pond just off the paved road is a good place to find several species of amphibian at night, and can



host Rufous-backed Kingfisher *Ceyx rufidorsa* by day. The Waterfall Trail has several species of babblers as well as Blue-banded Pitta. Other interesting species likely to be encountered are Wallace's Hawk Eagle *Spizaetus nanus*, Bornean Blue Flycatcher, Rufous-chested Flycatcher *Ficedula dumetoria* and Great Argus *Argus argus*. The trail leading across the park to the Matang Wildlife Centre may not be in good enough condition to be hiked all the way, but the wildlife centre may be accessed by road from the park headquarters; Fairy Pitta and Bornean Bristlehead have been recorded here.

**Chupak** Chupak is an area of rice fields on the old Kuching–Serian road. It provides a different selection of species and is a favourite for locals looking for freshwater birds. Some of the interesting sightings here include Blue Quail *Coturnix chinensis*, Greater Painted-snipe *Rostratula benghalensis*, and Watercock *Gallixres cinerea*, besides the regular egrets, herons, freshwater terns, plovers and sandpipers. The site is reported on occasion to host Pin-tailed Parrotfinch *Erythrura prasina*.

**Semenggoh Nature Reserve** Although best known for its rehabilitated Orangutan *Pongo pygmaeus*, this area, only 30 minutes' drive from Kuching, can be a good place to see a selection of lowland forest birds. It is popular among local birders as it is one of the nearest forested areas to the city. A few easy lookout points on high ground, overlooking open areas along the main road, provide a good introduction to forest birds for first-time visitors. Hooded Pitta *Pitta sordida*, Malaysian Eared Nightjar *Eurostopodus temminckii*, Long-billed Partridge *Rhizothera longirostris*, and the globally Vulnerable Bornean Wren Babbler *Ptilocichla leucogrammica* have been recorded in the reserve. The Long-billed Partridge was heard calling here by YST as recently as January 2010 and local birders have discovered a site north of the reserve where the frequently overlooked Bonaparte's Nightjar *Caprimulgus concretus* may be encountered.

**Kuching Wetland National Park** Readily accessible by hired boat from Santubong or Damai, this is perhaps the best place close to Kuching to see Lesser Adjutant *Leptotilos javanicus*, as well as Proboscis Monkey and Irrawaddy Dolphin. Others species recorded here include Bornean Bristlehead.

**Maludam National Park** Visiting this 43,000 ha national park, home to the last viable population of the endemic Red Banded Langur *Presbytis melalophos*, requires much longer travelling time from Kuching. Although the park has been

extensively logged, Maludam contains the largest remaining peat swamp forest in Sarawak. A river running through the heart of the park is accessible by boat from the coastal village of Maludam. The park can also be reached from Kuching via the Samarahan road, with a crossing by car ferry over the Sadong River. This road continues to the opposite side of the national park along the Lupar River, where a ferry service is available. The estuary of Sg Maludam is perhaps the best place to see Lesser Adjutant in Sarawak. Hook-billed Bulbul is present along the river, as are other difficult-to-see species including Scarlet-breasted Flowerpecker. Given the presence of suitable habitat the area should be searched for Grey-breasted Babbler *Malacopteron albugulare* and the elusive Brown-backed Flowerpecker *Dicaeum everetti* (BirdLife International 2009e). Bornean Bristlehead, Storm's Stork *Ciconia stormi* and Proboscis Monkeys are also present.

#### *Miri and its environs*

At the eastern edge of the state, the town of Miri is best reached by air either from Kuching or from Kota Kinabalu. Good roads also connect the cities, but driving times are quite lengthy. Bintulu, a few hours' drive west of Miri on the road to Kuching, provides access to the mangrove and peat swamp forests of Semilijau National Park. Bintulu, however, can also be reached by air, and the new road between Bintulu and Miri passes almost exclusively through long, depressing stretches of oil palm and is not safe after dark. The drive from Kota Kinabalu, which crosses the Sabah–Sarawak border and passes through both sections of Brunei Darussalam, requires innumerable passport checks. Birding localities that can be visited from Miri include:

**Gunung Mulu National Park** At 52,865 ha the second largest and most famous of Sarawak's national parks, it is best reached by air from Miri. Visitors have the choice of the expensive Royal Mulu Resort just outside the park or less expensive lodges, including kitchen facilities at the park headquarters. There are a number of mostly paved trails through the forest leading to the famous caves; the best-known of these, Deer Cave, is an almost guaranteed locality for Bat Hawk *Macheiramphus alcinus*, especially at dusk as the bats emerge. The park includes highland forest, but this can only be reached by trekking. Mulu has an impressive bird list of 262 species, including Hose's Broadbill, the elusive Black Oriole, the splendid, but Endangered Bornean endemic Bulwer's Pheasant *Lophura bulweri*, all eight species of Bornean hornbills and the enigmatic and 'invisible' Bornean Peacock Pheasant *Polyplectron schleiermacheri*.

**Lambir Hills National Park** This 6,952 ha park lies some 30 km south of Miri along the Miri–Bintulu Road. Its area includes the central portion of the Lambir Hills, a sandstone escarpment with a maximum height of 465 m. More than half of the park is dipterocarp forest, crossed by four primary and seven secondary trails. Accommodation is available, with a small canteen at the park office; cooking is not allowed inside the hostel. Birds at Lambir Hills include Rufous-bellied Eagle *Hieraetus kieneri* and Bornean Bristlehead. Blue-winged Pitta *Pitta moluccensis* has been sighted as recently as September 2009 and the Great Argus can be heard calling incessantly in the morning. The northern section of the park, in the vicinity of Bukit Song, is further from the park facilities and less often visited, but harbours many forest species such as Thick-billed Green Pigeon *Treron curvirostra*, Purple-naped Sunbird *Hypogramma hypogrammicum*, Rufous-backed Kingfisher, Red-bearded Bee-eater *Nyctornis amictus* and Black Magpie *Platysmurus leucopterus*.

**Loagan Bunut National Park** This 10,736 ha national park, lying 130 km from Miri, includes Sarawak's largest natural freshwater lake (650 ha). The lake harbours Oriental Darter *Anhinga melanogaster*, Grey-headed Fish Eagle *Ichthyophaga ichthyaetus*, Lesser Fish Eagle *I. humilis* and Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*, with Blue-crowned Hanging Parrot *Loriculus galgulus* and Long-tailed Parakeet *Psittacula longicauda* in the fringing forest. Kingfishers include Stork-billed *Pelargopsis capensis*, Blue-eared *Alcedo meninting* and Rufous-backed. Hook-billed Bulbul has been recorded. Five of Borneo's eight hornbill species, including Wrinkled *Aceros corrugatus* and Helmeted *Rhinoplax vigil*, have been recorded here. Great Argus and Crested Partridge *Rollulus roulroul* occur in dry forest, while the freshwater swamp-forest along Sungai Loagan Bunut also supports the globally Near Threatened Grey-headed and Lesser Fish Eagles.

Based on descriptions from local Berawan fishermen, Great-billed Heron *Ardea sumatrana* occurs here. Storm's Stork is also present, and is often seen by locals along the upper reaches of the smaller streams; it was recorded during the 2009 Asian Waterbird Census. In February 2003, a free-flying juvenile Red-footed Booby *Sula sula*—a rare vagrant—arrived at the lake, possibly wind-blown by the monsoon winds. It remained for a week and then disappeared.

**Niah National Park** The park bird list boasts 241 species (Smythies 1999, Marduka 2001, Sarawak Forest Department 2002). Niah is a reasonably typical example of lowland dipterocarp forest. Limestone

outcrops support both a small but specialised bird assemblage as well as a number of generalists. The park supports seven globally threatened species. Oriental Darter and Grey-headed and Lesser Fish-Eagles have also been recorded in the area.

The most famous feature of the area is the Niah limestone caves complex that harbour great numbers of nesting swiftlets and also prehistoric rock paintings. The swiftlet population, which consists of Edible-nest *Collocalia fuciphaga*, Black-nest *C. maxima*, and Mossy-nest Swiftlets *C. salangana*, was estimated to be 1.7 million birds in the 1950s but had decreased to about 80,000 by the time of a 2001 survey (Leh & Sim 2001), but is nonetheless an amazing spectacle. The population supports a local nest-collecting industry.

**Similajau National Park** Located about 30 km from Bintulu, this park protects one of the most beautiful coastal areas in Malaysia, with miles of unspoiled sandy and rocky beaches facing the South China Sea. Expanded in 2000, it now contains 8,996 ha of virgin forest in a strip some 30 km wide running along the coast. The park list holds 185 bird species, including Mangrove Blue Flycatcher *Cyornis rufigastra* and Storm's Stork has been recorded here (NPWO 1987, Duckworth & Kelsh 1988). The Grey Imperial Pigeon *Ducula pickeringii*, an island specialist, has been recorded in the mangroves. Other globally Near Threatened wetland-dependent species include resident Malaysian Plover and Oriental Darter (Duckworth *et al.* 1996). Although the surrounding areas have been much degraded owing to the incursions of farming and oil palm plantations, there could still be many interesting birds to be found in Similajau.

**Brunei** Although Brunei Derussalam is not part of Sarawak, Miri is also a good jumping-off point for a visit to birding localities in this neighbouring small country. The border is only a 45-minute drive away, and the forest on the Brunei side of the border is in considerably better condition than that in Sarawak. A dirt road paralleling a large water pipeline, running south of the main road just past the turnoff to the town of Seria, is worth exploring. If you do visit Brunei, remember that if you go by car you will need to have the automobile registration documents to cross the border. It is also a good idea to get some Brunei currency in order to pay the exit toll at the border on your return; the border officials are very reluctant to accept any other, including Malaysian ringgit, and may only do so at an inflated rate.

#### Further afield

**Pulong Tau National Park** Protecting an area of 59,817 ha of pristine rainforest, Pulong Tau NP,

Sarawak's largest park, is located in the northern highlands, a mountainous region more commonly known to birdwatchers as Kelabit Highlands or Bario (see below). With spectacular mountain landscapes including Gn Murud, Sarawak's highest peak at 2,424 m, and the Tama Abu range, the park has plenty to offer nature lovers.

It can be accessed by flights operated by MASwings from Miri to Bario, Ba' Kelalan, Long Banga and Long Lellang. The easiest way to get to the park is a three-hour drive from Ba' Kelalan by four-wheel-drive vehicle to the foot of Gn Murud, an area known as Lepo Bunga. From Lepo Bunga one can hike to the summit of Gn Murud in about a day, and accommodation is available en route to the summit at the church camp, which consists of more than 95 huts and was developed by the Ba' Kelalan community to accommodate pilgrims.

Sreedharan (2006) recorded more than 300 species of birds in the park during an ITTO-supported project and the complete park list includes such species as Bulwer's Pheasant and the Vulnerable Black Partridge *Melanoperdix niger*. The park's broad altitudinal range and habitat diversity provides habitat for numerous endemic species including Bornean Whistler *Pachycephala hypoxantha*, Bornean Barbet, Mountain Barbet *Megalaima monticola*, Whitehead's Broadbill *Calypptomena whiteheadi*, Hose's Broadbill, Whitehead's Spiderhunter *Arachnothera juliae* and Mountain Serpent Eagle *Spilornis kinabaluensis*. It has been proposed to extend the park to include the twin peaks of Batu Lawi and its surrounding forest, where the recent study conducted by the ITTO project has reported sighting Black Oriole.

**Ba' Kelalan** Ba' Kelalan is situated at 950 m in a fertile, broad valley surrounded by forested hillsides. It can be reached by flights operated by MASwings and is the gateway to the northern part of Pulong Tau NP (see below). In addition, nearby hunting trails provide easy access inside degraded forest that is home to Ruddy Cuckoo Dove *Macropygia emiliana*, Oriental Bay Owl *Phodilus badius*, and a variety of the commoner montane Sundaic species. An old logging road less than 10 km south of town allows access to selectively logged forest at 1,000–1,400 m. Many Bornean endemics are surprisingly easy to see here, including the very common Pygmy White-eye, Mountain Serpent Eagle (JE noted up to five in the air together), Bornean Barbet, Mountain Barbet, Whitehead's Broadbill, Hose's Broadbill, Whitehead's Spiderhunter, and even the rarely encountered Bornean Frogmouth *Batrachostomus mixtus*.

### **Bario and the Kelabit Highlands**

Bario, the main village in the Kelabit Highlands, is the gateway to the central part of the Pulong Tau NP. There are unconfirmed records of Bornean Peacock Pheasant from the forest near Nanga Gaat (Smythies 1999). Rail-babbler *Eupetes macrocerus* has been heard towards the end of the trail to Pa' Ukat, a small village a half-hour's walk from the centre of Bario. Ruddy Cuckoo Dove is also common. Band-bellied Crake *Porzana paykullii* is an occasional non-breeding visitor to the area (Smythies 1999).

**Long Banga and Long Lamai** This area in north-eastern Sarawak, close to the border with Indonesia, forms part of the Upper Baram drainage, and may provide good birding opportunities despite deforestation, particularly around Long Banga. According to information from local Saban people, pheasants—including Bulwer's Pheasant—are common and easy to find (and occasionally end up in hunters' pots), whilst both Pin-tailed Parrotfinch and Tawny-breasted Parrotfinch *Erythrura hyperythra* are said to visit rice fields in the area near harvest time.

Logging roads cut across the entire landscape and there are trails everywhere, but these should not be attempted without a local guide; Penan guides can be hired in Long Lamai. Four-wheel-drive vehicles are available from Long Banga and Long Puak. Accommodation options are limited, but arrangements can be made to stay with the Penan in Long Lamai for a couple of days.

**Long Lellang** Long Lellang, another village in the Kelabit Highlands, lies at 490 m, with extensive areas of secondary forest accessible along logging roads reaching up to 700 m. This area offers easy viewing of a number of lowland Bornean and Sundaic endemics. Towering over the village is Gn Murud Kecil, cloaked in virgin forest stretching to the peak at over 1,600 m. Accompanied by a Penan hunter from the village as a guide, it is easy to camp for 1–2 nights on the mountain (JE) in search of slope specialists including Bulwer's Pheasant, Blue-banded Pitta, Banded Pitta *Pitta guajana*, Hose's Broadbill, Bornean Wren Babbler and White-necked Babbler. At night the calls of the little-known Dulit Frogmouth have been heard here. The renowned Penan hunters make excellent guides. They have an intimate knowledge of the forest, and know the calls and behaviour of most species. Long Lellang may be reached by air from Miri and accommodation is available at Mr Balang Maput's Kelabit house in the village.

For the more adventurous the extensive network of logging roads in Sarawak could make

for an exciting trip from Miri—Long Lelang is just eight hours away by four-wheel-drive vehicle in the dry season, and most of the road goes through secondary forest with very little traffic.

MASwings flies once or twice a week to several other villages in interior Sarawak that have yet to be visited by birdwatchers extensively in recent times, if at all. It is still easy to depart Kuala Lumpur in the morning, and get yourself into Sarawak's primary forest by the late afternoon.

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