



The Red Leaf Monkey *Presbytis rubicunda* is endemic to the island of Borneo; notice the long, weak tail typical for this genus of primates.

Facing page: The Stork-billed Kingfisher in a dive.

# Kinabatangan River

*The Best of  
Borneo Wildlife*



Since he first visited Kinabatangan River 10 years ago, Bjorn Olesen has been drawn to East Malaysia several times a year, to capture images of some of Borneo's picturesque and unique wildlife.

Text and photographs by **Bjorn Lynggaard Olesen**

**KINABATANGAN RIVER** starts its course deep in the mountainous interior of Sabah. From there it reaches the lowlands and winds across a rich mosaic of forests, swamps, and limestone outcrops covering one of Malaysia's largest floodplains. It is the second longest river in Malaysia; after a 560 km run, it empties into the Sulu Sea.

The Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary lies within the vast floodplain of the Sungai Kinabatangan. At 270 square kilometres, the sanctuary is part of an important network of conservation areas in the lowlands of eastern Sabah. Some areas remain under water for long periods in the wet season, and oxbow lakes, formed by large meanders of the river that have been cut off from the main channel, are numerous.

It is not surprising, giving such varied habitats, that there is a bewildering

abundance and diversity of wildlife. Among the primates that share the forest are Orang Utan, Proboscis Monkey, Silvered Leaf Monkey and the Red Leaf Monkey, endemic to Borneo.

During the drier months of the year (April to October) small groups of Borneo Pygmy Elephant (*Elephas maximus borneensis*) are fairly easy to spot around Kinabatangan; this part of Sabah is probably the best place in the world to get good views of the smallest elephant in the world. It was long believed that

these animals were descendants from a captive population of Asian Elephants introduced to Borneo; only in 2003 did DNA analysis reveal them to be remnants of an isolated wild population that is now regarded as a distinct subspecies. With less than 1,000 individuals left in the wild, according to a wildlife study by WWF in 2007, this is the most endangered elephant taxon in the world.

Like in other parts of the elephant's range, shrinking forests have brought the animals into more frequent contact with



A safari on the river.

people. In April 2009 I watched 4 adult elephants cross the river in virtual darkness to invade a palm oil plantation to have a real good feed on young oil palm shoots - another stark reminder of the human-elephant conflict.

The best way to experience the beauty of Kinabatangan is by a river safari organized by one of the established companies around Sukau. The main flowering and fruiting season, from April to October is generally fairly dry, and a good time for spotting many birds and animals.

The most magical moments are at dawn, when the chorus of birds gives a very clear impression of the forest waking up for the day ahead. Hornbills are plentiful, often you can hear the unmistakable sound of hornbills in flight, their stiff wing feathers emitting a whooshing sound that can be heard at long distances.

Along the river look out for Oriental Darter, Storm's Stork, Stork-billed and Common Kingfishers; the Buffy Fish Owl comes out to hunt



The Stork-billed Kingfisher *Pelargopsis capensis* is abundant along the rivers on Borneo, this one got lucky after a dive into the mud.

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A rare sequence of two Colugos (or Flying Lemur) *Galeopterus variegatus* in a tender moment; studies tend to show that the larger grey animals are female, while the smaller rufous individuals are males, this situations seems to confirm it.

for frogs at night. Among the reptiles, Malayan Monitor Lizard and Saltwater Crocodile are both common.

Towards dusk, troops of Proboscis Monkeys begin to gather in the safety of riverside trees to prepare for sleep. This distinctive primate found only on Borneo is one of the star attractions of the river safari.

Nearby, the Gomantong Caves are quite close to the visitor lodges at Sukau. They are easily accessible by road, and definitely worth a visit, famous for their breeding populations of swiftlets. Like most other places in South-east Asia, local people here organize collections of used swiftlet nests for consumption.

Visitors to the caves will become immediately aware of a very strong

smell of ammonia coming from the vast amounts of guano deposited by both swiftlets and bats. These deposits make the caves an ideal microhabitat for cockroaches and crickets.

Late afternoon is a good time to visit, when literary millions of bats leave the caves. On their way out, they are often ambushed by Bat Hawks or by Peregrine Falcons. The caves are within a forest reserve; look out for the Red Leaf Monkey, which occurs in this area, as well as various species of strictly nocturnal flying squirrels.

A period of intensive logging of Sabah's lowland rainforests reached its peak in the 1970s and 1980s. As the valuable hardwood trees began to be depleted, the development of oil palm



The White-crowned Hornbill *Berenicornis comatus* is an inconspicuous member of the hornbill family; it tends to move from tree to tree while staying inside the canopies, this is a rare glimpse of a male in the open.



If you count the bills of these roosting Bushy-crested Hornbills *Anorrhinus galeritus* there are five, if you count the tails, you will see that there are actually six in the group.



The Borneo race of the Black Magpie *Platysmus leucopterus aterrimus* has all-black wings and a distinct crest showing well in this rare photograph of a shy, low-density forest bird.



The baby-faced Borneo Pygmy Elephant *Elephas maximus borneensis* comes out into the Kinabatangan River to cool off. The male only reaches a height of 2.5m compared to other Asia Elephants that grow up to 3 meters.

plantations on the cleared land picked up pace in the 1980s and 1990s. These changes along the lower Kinabatangan pose enormous challenges to the environment.

Working to maintain the balance between the wise use and protection of the Kinabatangan floodplain has been the aim of focused conservation efforts, where WWF Malaysia has done a good job. However, efforts to upgrade the sanctuary's conservation status to that of a National Park have met resistance from the logging industry and from local plantation owners who want to expand.

From my observations in the past 5 years, a reasonably balance has been achieved between development and conservation in the Kinabatangan River complex, and the quality wildlife is certainly still there to be watched and enjoyed. 🌳

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#### GETTING THERE

There are direct flights to Kuala Lumpur and Kota Kinabalu to Sandakan, the second-largest city in Sabah. Singapore residents need to go via Kota Kinabalu until the announced direct service Singapore–Sandakan starts, hopefully later in 2009.

From Sandakan it is a 2-3 hours overland drive to the small village of Sukau, where most of the Kinabatangan eco-lodges are situated. Some tour companies prefer to take clients from Sandakan by boat along the coast and upriver, which for first-time visitors is an exciting experience.

I normally stay at Sukau Tomanggong Riverview Lodge run by North Borneo Safari; they have some of the best guides in the area for birding and photography. The lodge consists of 10 very simple twin bedrooms, located on the banks of the river next to the local WWF office.

The climate in this part of Borneo is hot and humid by day and pleasantly cool by night; it is best to visit outside the rainy season which runs from November to February.

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