

Birding Snippets

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Birding Borneo Part 4 : Rafflesia Reserve (Crocker Range National Park)

The Rafflesia Reserve is clearly marked by a prominent signboard with a cast model of the huge flower



The Rafflesia Information Centre (RIC) is located along the Kota Kinabalu-Tambunan road that winds its way up the mountains of the Crocker Range which runs parallel to the west coast of Sabah. The RIC's sole objective is the conservation of the Rafflesia. The montane forest around the reserve supports some species of birds which may be difficult to locate on Mount Kinabalu.

Map of Sabah, located at the northern part of the island of Borneo.



Map by Tan Gim Cheong



**Black-breasted
Fruithunter**

Chlamydochaera jefferyi
(endemic)
juvenile male

During dinner the night before, while still on Mt. Kinabalu, we had told Peter and Sam about our plans to visit the RIC and they decided to leave Mt. Kinabalu early the next morning for a day trip to the RIC. We left Mt. Kinabalu only after noon for the 3 hour drive to Gunung Alab Resort, which is the nearest accommodation to the RIC. After a lunch stop at Ranau, most of us were dozing off in the taxi when Ping Ling received a SMS from Sam. She read aloud "**fruithunter** seen opposite the *Rafflesia* Centre and **all 3 endemic barbets** seen well on fruiting tree by the roadside". We were all jolted awake and the silence broke into continuous chatter all the way till the resort!

Arriving at the resort, we hurriedly checked into our rooms and enquired about transport options to reach the RIC, which is 5 kilometres away. There was basically no public transportation for the 5km trip but the resort had just changed ownership and we were glad that the new owner was willing to send us to the RIC and pick us up in the evening, for a fee.

Late Afternoon at the Rafflesia Centre

Day 1
Weather: Good

Arriving at the RIC, we found it closed, but it didn't matter for most of the target birds would be seen along the road. We managed to located the fruiting tree and saw all the 3 endemic species of barbets on a tall fruiting fig tree up on a slope, by the roadside. They are the **Bornean Barbet**, **Mountain Barbet** and **Golden-naped Barbet** (all lifers). Unfortunately for me, the birds were way too high up for any decent pictures.



Dusky Munia
Lonchura fuscans
(endemic)
nesting at the RIC

We searched the area opposite the RIC but did not see the fruithunter. Instead, we saw the **endemic Kinabalu Leafbird** (lifer), a recent split from the Blue-winged Leafbird. Both male and female Kinabalu Leafbirds have black throats. **Dusky Munias** nested in the compound of the RIC. Other birds sighted included **Chestnut-hooded Laughingthrush**, **Little Cuckoo-Doves**, **Ashy Drongos** and **Bornean Treepies**. Before sunset, we returned to the resort, disappointed that we had missed the fruithunter.

Little Cuckoo-Dove
Macropygia ruficeps
a common species
at the RIC



The Next Day at the RIC

Day 2
Weather: Good,
becoming cloudy
in the
late afternoon

Early the next morning, we were birding at the RIC again. A **Mountain Imperial Pigeon** and a flock of 5 **Wreathed Hornbills** flew across the morning sky.

After about 2 hours, while we were dispersed approximately 50 metres apart individually along the road, Bingwen suddenly shouted "*Mr. Yong! Fruithunter!*" In a flash, everyone rushed to the spot where Bingwen stood. Ping Ling caught her breath and said "*It's been a long time since I ran this fast!*"

An **endemic** juvenile male **Black-breasted Fruithunter** (lifer) was feeding on the small green fruits of a tree. Moments later, an adult male was seen, its rich black breast contrasting handsomely with its grey plumage. Finally the most beautiful among them – an adult female – was seen, its black breast and orange plumage must have been among the prettiest we have seen on this trip. Sitting under a tree nearby and waiting, I was rewarded with a juvenile female Fruithunter – that made it 4 different plumages for 1 species!

The adults had a greater sense of survival – coming to feed and then disappearing into the forest, whereas the juveniles would spend more time at the fruiting tree and even perch for quite long.

**Black-breasted
Fruithunter**
Chlamydochaera jefferyi
(endemic)
juvenile female



2 soaring raptors gave us some excitement and they turned out to be **Blyth's Hawk-Eagles**. **Chestnut-crested Yuhinas (endemic)** came by in noisy flocks. **Temminck's Sunbird** (lifer) came repeatedly to feed on the red flowers of a roadside tree.

The only trail to the rafflesias was closed as there were no rafflesias in bloom. Going down the steep slope along the fence encompassing the area of the rafflesia flowers, Ding Li managed another big tick with a view of a **Whitehead's Spiderhunter** high up in the canopy.

Other birds seen here but not at Mt. Kinabalu included **White-browed Shrike-Babbler** and **Bar-winged Flycatcher-Shrike**.

Common montane birds such as the Indigo Flycatcher, Black-capped White-eye, White-throated Fantail, Yellow-breasted Warbler and Ochraceous Bulbul were also seen.

Those heard but not seen included Crimson-headed Partridge, Mountain Tailorbird and Yellow-vented Bulbul.

A Mountain Barbet (endemic) was seen digging a hole in a dead tree trunk at mid level and I was finally able to get a picture of this Bornean endemic.

Mountain Barbet
Megalaima monticola
(endemic)
digging a hole on
a dead tree trunk



We were back at Gunung Alab Resort before dark and spent some time looking at the **Glossy Swiftlets** nesting under the eaves of the roof, right outside our rooms!

Glossy Swiftlet
Collocalia esculenta
nesting at
Gunung Alab Resort



Final Moments on Borneo

The next morning, we bade goodbye to this biologically rich island and set off for Kota Kinabalu for our return flight. In slightly more than a week, we went from lowland riverine forest to lowland rainforest to montane forest and recorded 200 species of birds, including 28 species endemic to Borneo.