

Birding Snippets

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Birding Gunung Kerinci & Tapan Road, Sumatra - Part 1



View of Gunung Kerinci from Pak Subandi's house with tea estate in the foreground.

Sumatra is the 5th largest island in the world and there are more than 20 species of birds confined within its shores. Most of these endemic species are montane birds and Gunung Kerinci, the highest mountain on Sumatra (3805m), is a good place to look for most of them.

It was a beautiful morning when Simon Cockayne and I took a short morning flight on Tiger Airways from Singapore's Budget Terminal to Padang Airport, the usual launching pad for trips to

Gunung Kerinci. As the aeroplane flew over the mountainous spine of Sumatra, we could see large expanses of healthy-looking forest on the mountainous slopes and I wondered what avian treasures we would encounter for the next several days. Exiting the terminal, I just had to look for someone holding a placard with my name written on it and soon enough I found my driver. I was to find out later that the driver was the eldest son of my host and guide, Pak Subandi, and the driver's companion was his youngest son.



Sumatran Trogon
Apalharpactes mackloti
(endemic)
A split from Blue-tailed
Trogon.

Gunung Kerinci is part of the large Kerinci-Seblat National Park and the usual base for birders, and climbers too, is Keresik Tua village, also spelled Kersik Tuo. The 200 km drive from Padang took six and a half hours! Well, the 'highway' is a single lane country road winding through the hills and villages. For some reason the kids in every village would put obstacles on the road to force vehicles to slow down to a crawl and they would hold out baskets apparently asking for handouts.

We left Padang Airport just after 8am and made 1 stop to refuel the vehicle. Around noon, we were handed a bottle of water each and some biscuits. These we consumed in the moving vehicle. At 2.30pm, we finally arrived at the little village of Kersik Tua. Subandi welcomed us with a refreshing drink. Knowing that it was Ramadan, I was not expecting anything for lunch, but Subandi is used to hosting foreigners and we were promptly ushered for a hearty lunch. We were the only guests and were free to choose any room we want. Only the 2 rooms in front had attached washroom and although these 2 rooms could take 2 persons each, on its rather small double bed, we decided to occupy 1 room each.

First taste of Gunung Kerinci

Day 1
(Late Afternoon)
Weather: Good

After settling our things into our rooms, we still had 2 hours of daylight and we headed for the mountain. The 5km access road wound through a tea plantation, where a Long-tailed Shrike was sighted, and the sealed road ended at a big

dilapidated signboard. Our first target would be an owl. Subandi led the way along a rocky and muddy trail. Nearing the edge of the forest, we turned 90 degrees left and walked across the vegetable plots, where we sighted a Grey Wagtail. At the edge of the vegetable plots, there was a seemingly continuous row of wild vegetation, taller than a man's height, blocking our advance. Sure enough, there was a sort of 'tunnel' through the vegetation and we emerged on the dry riverbed.

It was 4 plus in the afternoon and amazingly this owl was calling at regular intervals! Even so, it was not that easy to locate. We crossed the dry riverbed and bashed through quite a bit of forest before Subandi located the calling bird, almost right above our heads – a Barred Eagle Owl, a lifer for me. It was an amazing sight to behold – a large, majestic owl in broad daylight. Sure enough it noticed our presence but it just perched there! We spent 30 minutes admiring and photographing it, during which, this individual continued to call! When we left, the owl coolly turned its head to watch us leave, as if to bid us goodbye!



Barred Eagle Owl *Bubo sumatranus* at a reliable stakeout.

As we made our way back to the start of the Kerinci trail, we saw an endemic Shiny Whistling Thrush (lifer) skulking amongst vegetation, a Maroon Woodpecker and a Grey-headed Flycatcher. The call of the Pygmy Wren-Babbler was also heard.

Back at the vegetable plots, we saw a group of young men who seem to have caught a bird. Subandi went over and spoke to them. Thankfully, they handed over the bird and left. It was a Shiny Whistling-Thrush. I wondered how they managed to catch this bird. The bird was secured in an ingenious manner - a hole was made in the middle of a small piece of cloth and the bird's head was put through this (the hole is smaller than the bird's body); the rest of the cloth was wrapped around the bird such that it cannot spread its wings and the loose ends of the cloth tied around the bird's feet with a string. Subandi slowly removed the bird from its encumbrance and set it upon a small log. The poor bird must be in a state of shock due to its being captured and remained on the log for some time before hopping into the undergrowth.

**An 'ungrateful' Shiny
Whistling Thrush
Myophonus melanurus
(endemic)
biting its rescuer!**



It was already dusk when we started to move into the forest. The concrete structure on the right side of the 'entrance arch' still stands, while on the left, only the foundations were visible. Right at the 'entrance arch', we heard and then saw a Pygmy Wren-Babbler skulking among the undergrowth. The trail was dark as it was under forest cover. A

bit beyond the stand of banana shrubs, we elicited a response from a Sumatran Frogmouth, with a bird flying by close to us, in the darkness. Heading back, we heard the call of the Mountain Scops Owl but failed to locate the bird even though it was close by.

Pygmy Wren-Babbler
Pnoepyga pusilla
skulking among the thickets.



Once we got out of the forest, we called for transport and soon we were back at the homestay. The homestay is located at around 1500m above sea level, which made it rather cold at night. I had read of accounts of having to experience invigorating cold showers at the homestay and was grateful that our host brought us each a pail of hot water, which we could mix with cold water so that we could have a warm shower – a very welcome proposition indeed! We were suitably refreshed and a warm dinner prepared by Subandi's wife ensued.

The walls of the dining area are decked with excellent photographs of our target birds – Sumatran Frogmouth, Graceful Pitta, etc. These pictures were courtesy of BirdTourAsia. Among the bird logbooks in the living room was a copy of "MacKinnon & Phillips", in English, courtesy of a foreign birder, thank you whoever you are!

The bed was kind of hard. Clad comfortably in T-shirt and shorts, it was warm enough as I lay under the blanket. Due to Ramadan, the nearby mosque was playing the 'music' at unusual hours,

throughout the night, so sleep wasn't particularly restful.

Gunung Kerinci up to Camp Cochoa

Day 2
Weather: Good initially,
Rain in late afternoon.



Sumatran Trogon
Apalharpactes mackloti
(endemic)
The maroon rump
distinguishes it from the
Javan Trogon.

Getting up the next morning at 4 plus, it proved a rather chilly experience putting on new clothes and socks which had become cold due to the low temperatures! The hot drinks that came with the warm breakfast was much welcomed. We headed for the forest at 5 plus in the morning. Sunrise and sunset is at 6am and 6pm respectively. It felt cold even in the vehicle, which did not have air-conditioning nor heating. We got out of the car at the end of the sealed road, and as we trudged the 700m or so in the open, to the forest edge, the windchill effect caused by the windy conditions made it even colder. I was wearing 3 layers of clothes, but no jacket as I felt it would be too bulky to carry when it gets warmer later in the day. A Long-tailed Shrike was seen near the 'entrance arch'.

Once inside the forest it felt much better as the foliage effectively shut out the wind. Without the windchill, I actually felt hot and promptly removed 1 layer of shirt! A few hundred metres on, I started to feel rather hot again and got down to just a T-shirt! No doubt the physical exertion really had an effect. The sky had brightened and along the trail, we saw an endemic Sumatran Trogon (lifer) – a beautiful bird with a generous application of red lipstick! (I think it's useful to state that the Blue-tailed Trogon has been split into Sumatran Trogon and Javan Trogon). Subandi called it a stupid bird – because this was a species known to always come closer when its call was imitated. Farther on, we encountered a little brown bird actively moving about the understorey. When it gave its call, Simon immediately recognised it as a Lesser Shortwing (another lifer for me)! It would be frequently heard and seen throughout the rest of the trip. There was much activity in the crown of a tall tree which appeared to be fruiting and I saw another 2 lifers here – Sumatran Green Pigeon and Wedge-tailed Pigeon.

Shiny Whistling Thrush
Myophonus melanurus
(endemic)
The 'freed' individual
grooming itself after its
release.



I had fallen behind in my attempt to get a decent image of the Lesser Shortwing. When I reached a dilapidated shelter, I knew that I had arrived at Base Camp. Less concertingly, I saw an obvious trail to the right and a less conspicuous one in front that bends into thick vegetation to the left and wondered which trail Subandi and Simon might have taken. As it turned out, there was another short side trail as well and they were just birding in the vicinity of Base Camp.

We proceeded along the 'less conspicuous trail in front' (which is the main trail) and after about 200m came to an area with fallen logs and saw something moved in the thick undergrowth to the right. Then the sounds of wings ruffling characteristic of pheasants was heard and Simon surmised that it could well be a Salvadori's Pheasant. The pheasant did not show.

The understory to the left where the fallen logs lay was more open and I decided to let out the Red-billed Partridge's call. There was an immediate response from at least 2 birds and we were thrilled. We had read recent reports which indicated that the Red-billed Partridge was getting scarce at lower levels due to trapping and the best chance of encountering them were much higher up the mountain. We positioned ourselves behind tree trunks and foliage to hide our presence and soon enough a few dark shapes could be seen moving

about on the ground ahead. Moments later, out of nowhere, a Red-billed Partridge crossed the trail just a few metres from the tree trunk where I was hiding! It moved quickly into the undergrowth, so no pictures but yes, an endemic lifer at an unexpected altitude!

Next up was a Maroon Woodpecker which crossed the trail, moving from one undergrowth to another. A Schneider's Pitta was then heard and we froze for a moment. It was calling from a gully but it wouldn't show. Instead, a Snowy-browed Flycatcher and 5 Fire-tufted Barbets put up an appearance. Another 2 Fire-tufted Barbets were heard, so were the calls of the White-browed Shortwing.

Fire-tufted Barbet
Psilopogon pyrolophus
Quite common at Kerinci.



We would encounter 2 little Sunda Warblers (another lifer for me) before reaching 'Air Minum' – which was a small clearing marked with a slightly bent signboard. We stopped for a break and we could see the dry riverbed to the left. Some birds were flying about in the middle and upper storeys. Looking through our binoculars, we identified Sunda Minivet (lifer), Grey-chinned Minivet, Bar-winged Flycatcher-Shrike, Grey-throated Babbler and a Cuckoo-Dove, likely a Little. A single note call was heard repeatedly and suddenly Simon realised that it was a Sumatran Choa calling from high above, however no sighting. We proceeded beyond Air Minum and the trail steepened. 2 endemic Shiny Whistling

Thrushes were encountered.

We had lunch on a huge fallen log and then continued on to Camp Cochoa – another dilapidated shelter with displaced zinc roofs. Here, we encountered the Sunda Bush-Warbler and White-throated Fantail. Then I sighted a plump looking wren-babbler, which reminded me of the Mountain Wren-Babbler I had seen on Mount Kinabalu recently. Knowing the Mountain Wren-Babbler does not occur on Sumatra, I noted the characteristics of the bird and upon checking with my field guide, realised I had seen an Eye-browed Wren-Babbler (another life, hooray)!

**Eye-browed
Wren-Babbler**
Napothera epilepidota



It started to rain and we took shelter under whatever was left of the zinc roof with my umbrella providing additional 'roof space'. Deciding that we would be here for a while, Subandi made us hot coffee and it was rather nice to sip hot coffee in the fresh and cool mountain air, under the splatter of the raindrops! The fragrant coffee attracted a ground squirrel which came near, apparently looking for scraps. The rain changed into a drizzle and we headed down the mountain. Just below Air Minum, a single call from a Rajah's Scops Owl was heard and the bird sounded like it was some distance away, in the forest. The Mountain Tailorbird and Gold-whiskered Barbet were also heard today.

Retiring to the homestay, we had a welcome warm

shower and delicious dinner. After dinner, we had a chat with Subandi. I was pleasantly surprised that we did not encounter any leeches at all, whether along the trail or while bashing into the vegetation and even in the rain. Our host revealed that leeches do not occur on Gunung Kerinci – comforting information indeed! Then we took stock of the day's sightings and looked through the logbooks for recent sightings.

Gunung Kerinci up to Burnt Tree

Day 3
Weather: Good,
Drizzle in late afternoon,
Rain at night

We got up for an early start as we were eager to see the Sumatran Frogmouth. We entered the forest at around 4.30am and literally marched to the base camp. Following Subandi, we bashed a bit towards a gully and then he stopped and asked us to play the call. Sure enough, we elicited a response. After a while, the bird came in and we moved closer to the source of the call. It was finally located in the spotlight – a rather small, well camouflaged bird. Yes, the endemic Sumatran Frogmouth (lifer) it was! It was starting to get bright and we realised that we were actually standing on the 'secondary trail' barely a hundred metres from Base Camp.

Oops, sorry!

Well, at least it shows the short tail, which is the basis for the bird's other name : Short-tailed Frogmouth
Batrachostomus poliolophus
 (endemic)!



The first diurnal bird encountered was a Shiny Whistling Thrush. Proceeding on towards Air Minum, we encountered a diminutive Sunda Blue Robin (lifer), hopping about on the trail ahead.



Sunda Blue Robin
Myiomela Diana
Male.
Early bird on a dark forest floor.

Next, we heard the call of the Rusty-breasted Wren-Babbler but did not see it. A Schneider's Pitta was heard and we gamely bashed through the vegetation and came face to face with the call, but not the bird – again! We spent quite a lot of time searching, but failed to see the bird.

Proceeding back to the trail, we saw the Sunda Warbler again and heard a Maroon Woodpecker. Just 3 metres before reaching the trail, we froze as we heard sounds of wings-ruffling about. To our astonishment, 2 male Salvadori's Pheasants were walking somewhat quickly down the main trail! Yes, another lifer on the list! We proceed up the trail and encountered a Shiny Whistling Thrush at exactly the same spot as the day before.

At Air Minum, Subandi brought out a flask of very welcome, hot coffee and we took a break. This time round, we had lunch at Camp Cochoa entertained by the melodious song of the White-browed Shortwing which remained hidden in the undergrowth not more than a few metres away! I sat facing the trail going upwards and luckily for me, the White-browed Shortwing (lifer) decided to cross the trail from right to left and offered a view in the open as it stopped briefly right in the middle of the trail. Sure enough the ground squirrel came by again, looking for scraps. It seemed to like rice.

Lesser Shortwing
Brachypteryx leucophrys
Often heard and quite easy to see on Kerinci!



After lunch, we proceeded toward the area slightly beyond the burnt tree as it was our best bet for

the Sumatran Cochoa. The trail from here on was very steep and by now my right knee had started to hurt from all the 'mountain climbing' we did while birding, so I proceed at a slower pace. Along the way, I recorded and managed my first picture of the hyperactive Mountain Leaf Warbler as it stopped on a branch to eat an invertebrate. Sunda Minivets, Golden Babblers, White-throated Fantail and Blue Nuthatch were also seen.

Mountain Leaf-Warbler
Phylloscopus trivirgatus
**A hyperactive bird
frozen in time.**



The Burnt Tree was unmistakable. Around the Burnt Tree and slightly beyond, some birds would be seen flying, but views were too brief. Simon saw a Greater Yellowthroat and Wedge-tailed Pigeon while Subandi thought he saw a Long-tailed Sibia.

At around 4pm or just after, I decided to go down the mountain first as I expected my progress to be much slower than Simon and Subandi. Indeed, going down proved much harder on my hurting knee than going up! Reaching the Base Camp, I took a break and waited for the other 2. When Simon came down, he recounted 2 amazing encounters with the Salvadori's Pheasants – the first was a male, between the Burnt Tree and Camp Cochoa, sitting in the middle of the trail; the second was of 2 females, between Air Minum and Base Camp, also sitting right on the trail!

Another bird recorded was a Fire-tufted barbet on a fruiting tree along the 'new trail' which branches off from the Base Camp and rejoins the main trail

at Air Minum. The calls of the Black-browed Barbet was also heard.

It was already around 6pm and the light drizzle turned into rain and we decided to cancel our plans for nightbirds and head back to the homestay. Suitably refreshed after a warm shower and dinner, we had a little discussion and decided to head for Tapan Road the next day. I must be rather tired by now and the 'music' from the mosque seemed less of an issue tonight.