

Birding Snippets

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Birding Gunung Kerinci & Tapan Road, Sumatra - Part 3

Back to Gunung Kerinci

Day 5 During the pre-dawn drive on the access road, we
Weather: Good saw a **Barn Owl** sitting on the road itself. It was then flushed by our vehicle. The first half of the trail at the end of the access road through the vegetable plots was rocky and muddy. In particular, the rocks made walking difficult and uncomfortable and I was starting to dislike this section of the trail.

A Rufous Woodcock called as it flew by in the early morning. Between the Base Camp and Air Minum, I finally came face to face with the 2 individuals of the **endemic Rusty-breasted Wren-Babbler** (lifer), a bird which had eluded us thus far.

**Rusty-breasted
Wren-Babbler**
Napothera rufipectus
(endemic)



Along the same stretch of the trail, we had our first encounter with the **endemic Sumatran/Brown-winged Whistling Thrush** (lifer), a split from Sunda Whistling Thrush. It was a distinctive species, with brown wings and black, not blue head, when seen in the field. A photograph made with flash revealed that it's head was not really black but dark slaty-blue, no doubt the dim conditions in the forest made it appear black. The Collared Owlet's call could be heard near Air Minum. The call was somewhat different from birds in Peninsular Malaysia.



Sumatran/Brown-winged Whistling Thrush
Myophoneus castaneus
(endemic)

A Schneider's Pitta called from the direction of the dry river bed and we decided to go look for it. It was hard work bashing through the forest down the steep slopes to reach the dry river bed. The bird eluded us and we decided to try making our way down the dry riverbed, which was also the best place to look for the Sumatran Peacock-Pheasant. The steep cliffs, which would have been waterfalls if there was water, severely impeded progress. We had to detour many times from the dry riverbed, bashing into the forest. After a while, we decided that was just too difficult and all this bashing around was going to scare all the birds away. We climbed up the steep forested slopes back to the main trail, itself not an easy task, even though it seemed effortless to Subandi in his wellington boots!

After lunch, Subandi went back so he could bring us packet dinner while we headed for the dry riverbed, hoping to see the Sumatran Peacock-Pheasant. Here, Simon managed to finally see the Rusty-breasted Wren-Babbler. At 5pm we heard and subsequently saw the Barred Eagle Owl perched on a tree above the dry riverbed.

Today, we also recorded Sunda Warbler, Golden Babbler, Grey-throated Babbler, Lesser Shortwing, Grey Wagtail, Long-tailed Shrike, Mountain Leaf Warbler, Verditer Flycatcher, Snowy-browed Flycatcher and a Grey-headed Flycatcher feeding a young bird. New sightings for the trip included **Glossy Swiftlet, Slaty-breasted Rail** and **Pygmy Blue Flycatcher**.

As dusk fell, we waited for Subandi at the vegetable plots near the forest edge at the beginning of the trail and saw a Barred Eagle Owl flying from the direction of the dry riverbed across the vegetable plots and the path leading to the main trail, making a series of unusual sounds as it flew. Subandi came back with dinner at 6pm and we ate among the vegetable plots, scanning the forest edge for Salvadori's Nightjar. A search at the forest edge on both the left and right sides of the entrance arch produced nothing in the way of a nightjar.

**Snowy-browed
Flycatcher**
Ficedula hyperythra
male.
A rather tame species.



Inside the forest, we stood quietly in the darkness, along the trail listening for nightbirds when suddenly a grunting noise was heard ahead. Looking on, I saw the dark shape of an animal, 2 feet high, several metres away from us. I tried to switch on my flashlight but the batteries had gone flat! In the heat of the moment, Subandi couldn't locate the switch of the spotlight! Subandi started to back towards me and I myself backed towards Simon. Fearing that the animal may attack, I must have yelled or screamed and Subandi probably did the same. That sent the creature crashing through the forest, away from us. When we regained our composure, we turned on our flashlights (I had a small spare one) and proceeded to where the animal had stood. There we saw clear footprints, half the length of a man's foot, and claw marks on the tree roots right in front of the footprints. It was clear to me that we had encountered a Sun Bear.

We proceeded on and heard distinctive double-note calls. Thanks to Subandi's efforts, we had very good views of a cooperative **Mountain Scops Owl**, perched 3m high, on a horizontal branch. I even managed to locate its partner, perched farther behind.

Mountain Scops Owl
Otus spilocephalus



Gunung Kerinci

Day 6 By now we were familiar with the trails on Gunung
Weather: Good Kerinci and decided to give Subandi a break and
bird on our own. We made an early start. From the forest edge, we moved towards the dry riverbed and managed brief views of a Sumatran Frogmouth. When the skies brightened, we ended up searching high and low for the Schneider's Pitta which was calling from the river bank, very close to us. We followed the source of the call as it moved a small distance upriver but it just wouldn't show.

Simon started his way up the mountain, towards the area beyond the Burnt Tree to try his luck for the Sumatran Cochoa. My right knee was still hurting, so I only went up to the Base Camp. I trawled the trail slowly and encountered what I thought was most likely a juvenile Lesser Shortwing, repeatedly showing itself, on the trail. A beautiful Sumatran Trogon perched near the trail. I tried to whistle its call and it responded even though my whistling was really poor!

A Snowy-browed Flycatcher was also seen. Then, I heard a Schneider's Pitta calling not 1 metre away from me! But the vegetation was just too thick. It was calling softly but it was so near that I could clearly hear that the 2 note call had a sort of 'vibrating' quality to it. I chose a spot a few metres away and sat down, looking at the trail and hoping that the bird would cross the trail. It never did and after some time the calls ended.



Another view of the endemic and distinctive Brown-winged Whistling Thrush

Back at the river bed, a Sumatran Whistling Thrush was sighted and again, a Schneider's Pitta called. Still, no sighting! New bird for the trip was a **Little Pied Flycatcher**.

Simon came down the mountain and revealed that he had an amazing encounter with a mammal as he went up, between Air Minum and Camp Cochoa. He saw a mammal slightly bigger than the size of a domestic cat on the trail and stopped. The mammal slowly ambled towards him and he could see that it had the nose of a pig. It came right to his feet, had a few good sniffs, turned around and went back the same way it came, incredible! (We checked my mammal guidebook subsequently and decided that it must have been a Hog Badger). Birdwise, he sat at the particular spot beyond the Burnt Tree for 3 hours and finally heard and saw the elusive Sumatran Cochoa, congratulations! Other new birds seen up there included Black Eagle and Rufous-vented Niltava.

We had no success with the Rajah's Scops Owl. In any case, we did not have the call and were really just trying our luck! The Mountain Scops Owl was calling, but we had such good views the night before that we did not bother to look for it.

Last morning on Gunung Kerinci

Day 7
Weather: Good

This was our last day on Gunung Kerinci. We had a Rufous Woodcock calling as it flew above the dry riverbed pre-dawn. As we moved towards Base Camp, I was caught up photographing a male Snowy-browed Flycatcher and Simon continued on



Sunda Warbler
Seicercus grammiceps
gathering nesting material.

the trail. A Sunda Warbler kept flittering about near me. I decided to move away and see what it would do. It picked up some plant material and disappeared into the base of a fallen log. When it left the site, I went to have a look and saw that it was building a nest, which was almost complete!

At the same location, I had a Lesser Shortwing foraging on the ground. I flushed an Emerald Dove along the trail and encountered a bird wave comprising Sunda Minivet, Grey-chinned Minivet and Golden Babbler. Also encountered – Black-browed Barbet and new birds for the trip, **Indigo Flycatcher** and a female **Rufous-vented Niltava**. Pigeons were clearly moving in and out of vegetation but views were too brief for identification.

Nest of the Sunda Warbler at the base of a fallen tree root – pic taken with my camera-phone!



I was still hoping to see the Schneider's Pitta. I heard the call very close to me, near the trail. It was the softer version with the vibrating quality. I followed the call as the source moved away and it even crossed the trail ahead! My hopes started to ring higher, but it did not cross the trail again, instead it moved farther away from the trail, but the undergrowth here was not thick and I was still rather hopeful of a sighting. Moreover, I realized that there were actually 2 calling birds, both very close to me. Despite my best efforts, I could not locate the bird and then the gibbons started to



Rufous-vented Niltava
Niltava sumatrana
female

call, very loudly! They totally drowned out the pittas' calls and it was impossible to try to locate the birds.

An Eye-browed Wren-Babbler was seen and I decided to go after it through the vegetation and managed to secure photos of this species. A small flock of Grey-throated Babblers crossed the trail and continued to forage. Then I noticed that a Rusty-breasted Wren-Babbler attending to a chick on a nest at the fork of a small tree. The cup-shaped nest was only about a metre above the ground and just a few metres off the main trail! After the parent moved off, I could see the baby bird moving about and went closer to check – there was only one chick and it was a half grown youngster.



**Nest of
Rusty-breasted
Wren-Babbler
with the single chick.
Pic taken, again,
with my
camera-phone!**

We called it a day around noon time and went back for lunch and to pack up. We set off for Padang and Subandi brought his family along! During the journey in the vehicle, I felt particularly hot (the vehicle does not have air-conditioning). I remembered that it did not feel this way when we came. I realized that having spent a week on the mountain, we had acclimatized to the cooler climate, as a result, it felt particularly hot to me as the vehicle descended in altitude during the journey to Padang! It had turned dark when we arrived at Padang. We got off at a small hotel and bade

Subandi and his family goodbye. At the hotel reception, we were able to secure transport to the airport the next morning. Dinner was at a surprisingly nice restaurant next to the hotel. The next morning, we arrived at Padang Airport in good time for the short flight back to Singapore.

Among the 29 lifers for me, 14 were Sumatran endemics (out of the 20+ species endemic to the island). As I typed this report, I could feel Kerinci beckoning me to go back for the Schneider's Pitta and Sumatran Cochoa...

Non Avian Sightings

Apart from birds, we also had some mammal sightings. These included the Sun Bear, Hog Badger, Siamang, Gibbons, Mitred Langur, Ground Squirrel and Long-tailed Macaque.