

Kinabatang River, Nov 2014

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Unexpected, but extremely welcome clearance from home allowed me to stay on for a weekend of birding after I had finished running ACCV 2014 in Singapore. It got me thinking about the awesome birding opportunities that lay within a short, cheap flight of Changi. Having weighted up various options and taken some advice from Asian birders extraordinaire Rob Hutchinson and Martin Kennewell, I plumped for a couple of days on the Kinabatang River staying at Robert Chong's *Kinabatang Jungle Camp*.

As soon as my work in Singapore was done I headed to Changi and got an evening flight as far as Kota Kinabalu where I stayed in the cheap, convenient and just-about-adequate Casuarina Hotel. The taxi ride here was a complete rip-off – I could just about have walked the distance, barely a km from the ragged looking Air Asia terminal. In almost every respect the hotel was reminiscent of the place Steve Young and I had stayed overnight near Bangkok Airport back in Feb, and like that particular evening, my purpose here was staying somewhere passable that would ensure a quick getaway the following morning. The room was clean enough, and the staff very helpful, ready to drive me back to the airport at sparrow-fart the next day.

By 6am I was back in the terminal and checking for my 7am flight to Sandakan. Around 20 **Glossy Swiftlets** and a **Little Egret** constituted my first Bornean birds, viewed from the departure lounge as I awaited my flight. The remarkably cheap Air Asia flight between these two Sabah cities – \$28.50 – was on time and soon after arriving I was picked up by Robert's driver and we set out on the 2-3 hour journey. The road passed through mile after mile of seemingly endless palm oil plantations. **Cattle Egret, Tree Sparrow, Barn Swallow and White-breasted Woodswallow** were the only additions for the first 2 hours in this utterly depressing agri-desert where once was outstanding rainforest. As we approached Kota Kinabatang my driver suddenly announced that a large tree on the right hand side of the road sometimes holds a **Bat Hawk** (GPS 5 35' 30"N 117 50' 11"E). My compressed itinerary did not



permit a trip to the Gomantong Caves, so this was a potentially crucial bonus and he was very happy to have a rest and smoke while I checked it out from the roadside.

The tree was about 150m set back from the road, but I was able to pick out the shape of a raptor in dead branches on the left hand side of the tree against the bright sky. Briefly distracted by the piercing cry of a **Crested Serpent Eagle** (seen cruising across the road) I walked down the road with scope (the only time I would use the scope all trip, but worth it for this taxon) for a better viewing angle and now had a pretty good scoped view of this special raptor quietly minding its own business, occasionally preening. Black on the head, body and remiges, the stand out features on the perched bird were the small black crest, white bib interrupted by a thin black “beard”, long primaries extending beyond the tail, and especially the bright orange eye that glowed in the dark head. It kept its grey eyelid slightly squinted, amplifying an overall sinister appearance, befitting its modus operandi – hanging around bat colonies and picking them off as they emerge each evening. What a fantastic bonus and my smash-and-grab trip was already off to a flyer.

After grabbing some digiscoped pictures (in retrospect, disappointing) and some passable video we resumed the journey to Billit around 50km away. Soon afterwards we screeched to a halt again for another roadside raptor. The driver called this as a Changeable Hawk-eagle, but later inspection of my hastily grabbed pics suggested to me it was a young **Lesser Fish Eagle**. A brief view of a roadside shrike, chestnut and grey coloured had to have been **Tiger Shrike**, but a drive-by 2 second view was hardly ideal for a lifer. On arrival into the tiny riverside village of Billit I transferred to a boat for a 20min journey downstream to KJC, my first taste of the mighty Kinabatang, “Borneo’s Amazon”. **Bushy-crested Hornbill** became my first lifer of the river when we located a small group of these odd-looking hornbills – rather ugly, even – in a fruiting tree on the left bank.

By the time I arrived at KJC it was 11am and Robert was out on the river with other clients. He had warned me when I made the booking that he had two Hong Kong birders with him and that although we might join forces, there would be other times we would have to play it by ear in terms of who was targeting what for my two days. All I could do now was settle in to my room, and wander the garden, to an extent twiddling my thumbs. I considered a walk along the trails that surround the lodge but was told that maybe this was not a good idea, with elephants having been seen nearby recently. My walk was not very productive, yielding **Crimson Sunbird** and **Slender-billed Crow**, and I tried hard to get photos of a squirrel found on a tree near my bedroom, only to discover later that it was one of several that come into the open dining area for fruit set out on the balcony for them. An hour or so later as I scanned a tree by the kitchen area where there was some chattering, I was joined by one of the lodge chaps who identified the culprit as a **Grey-and-buff Woodpecker**. It turned out this was Romzi, who was there as a dedicated guide for me in case I needed to go separately from the HK birders.

When Robert returned it was nearly 1pm, and we had lunch together and then waited for the regular downpour to ease before heading out. Robert was off to the Gomantang Caves with his HK clients, Jennifer Leung (who nows lives in Beijing) and her friend Eliza, who had already spent a few days at KJC. They had expected to be there the previous day but the early afternoon downpour never eased so their cave visit was rescheduled to today. I contemplated asking to come along, but my main target there, Bat Hawk, was now safely under the belt, and my time on the river very limited – the better option was the default plan: I would go out on a boat with Romzi. This was an

excellent experience, and the right choice. Romzi proved be knowledgeable and client-focused, and the boatman tuned in to both his and my viewing – any time either Romzi or I appeared to show interest in something he would immediately slow, and at the slightest indication turn the boat and get us into a good viewing position.

As well as avian targets I was hoping for some of the mammalian specialties and within minutes we had located a small troop of **Proboscis Monkeys**. The dominant male with his pot belly, ridiculously long bulbous nose and permanent bright red erection sat around like an obscene muppet, eating fruit and scratching himself. The boatman tried to get me into a good angle for a photo (with great skill but without a great deal of luck), before I decided it was time to move on to see what else we could find along the river.

Green Imperial Pigeons were seen in good numbers, one of the commonest birds observed over the next two days, and **Silver-leaf Monkeys** (Langurs) were the commonest mammal seen. My first lifer of the afternoon was a group of **Long-tailed Parakeets**, distant but tickable. A pair of large hornbills crossed the river and landed high in a tree on the bank, identified by Romzi in flight as **Asian Black Hornbill**. Once perched I got a better look at these big, largely monochrome hornbills, much like the presumably very closely related Palawan Hornbill from a few hundred km to the north. We similarly found two more species of hornbill as we headed downstream on the main river, **Oriental Pied** (previously seen in Thailand) and **Wrinkled**, while a **Jerdon's Baza** once again had us manoeuvring the boat for a better view. An unidentified sp. of Green Pigeon got away without a firm id, and a juvenile **Brahminy Kite** sailed lazily downstream ahead of us.

At around 16:15 we reached a quieter tributary where we were able to cut the engine and enjoy the sounds of the forest. One of my top targets here was the common but unfeasibly coloured and constructed **Black-and-red Broadbill**, arguably the gaudiest of this cartoon-like family. We'd heard the smaller cousin Black-and-yellow a few times, but actually saw the chunky red stonker first, a pair giving great views, even if it was quite dark for photography. Soon after one of the **Black-and-yellow Broadbills** came down to check out Romzi's tape. **Blue-throated Bee-eater**, **Stork-billed Kingfisher** and lifer **Lesser Fish Eagle** all showed well in the beautiful evening light before we headed back out to the main river with the sun going down.



A **Lesser Adjutant** perched high on a set of dead trees by the junction of the tributary and main river. Initially we thought this was Storm's Stork, high on my list of targets. A pair of **Rhinoceros Hornbills** were slightly disappointing lifers – I would have hoped for better views of this stonking great hornbill with the ludicrous orange cask, but had to make do with fairly distant and almost silhouetted – but unequivocal – views, for now at least.

We headed back to KJC very content with a fairly gentle introduction that had still yielded a bag of quality lifers. Dinner comprised a delicious and generous buffet, set out for just the three guests – myself, Jen and Eliza – washed down with a couple of beers. We enjoyed peering down to **Bearded Pig** and **Cat Civet** that arrived below the raised, open-walled dining area hoping for morsels of food,

and a **Smith's Gecko**, a pretty and huge (foot-long) gecko that was hanging around presumably for insects attracted to the dining room lights.

Dinner out of the way, it was time for some more birding. Jen, Eliza and I headed down to the boat with Romzi (Robert having a night off). The birding started before we'd reached the boat, with the local **Brown Wood Owl** perched in a regular spot at the end of the boardwalk. We headed upstream to the tributary Romzi and I had worked earlier. I was keen for anything, while the girls, now on their 2nd or 3rd night trip were particularly targeting Bay Owl.



All was quiet initially, and there was no response to Romzi's recording of a Bay Owl, until we heard the curious warble of a **Large Frogmouth**. Having braved the dark, damp, leech-filled forest the



previous night and scored one for themselves, the girls were not keen on a repeat, but Romzi and I dived into the forest with torches and optics and approached the sound. About 20m into the forest it called again and sounded close; suddenly Romzi announced he had it. I peered in the general direction of his torch-light unable to see anything resembling a bird and somewhat in awe of how apparently easily he had located it. When I finally did track it down my respect went up even further – it was quite high up and almost completely obscured by foliage and I could scarcely believe he'd managed to find it. I fired off an awful a record shot, took in the view in binoculars as Romzi held the torch steady. Lifer in the bag, I now moved forward in the hope of getting a better, less obstructed view. In fact the bird was quite settled and I was

able to ping off many shots with and without flash, fiddling with my various camera settings and generally filling the memory card with second rate pics of a first-rate lifer.

Romzi and I rejoined the girls in the boat and tried another spot for Bay Owl, but still without luck. A **Buffy Fish Owl** ghosted across the river and we located him on an overhanging branch. They are quite common and we had two on this trip; another lifer and gratifying to have this easily after dipping in a few possible places previously. Sadly, my flash now decided to give up the ghost, perhaps having got wet or dirty during frogmouth adventure, so my pics are horribly blurred. Fortunately Jen, able to squeeze slightly better low light performance from her 7D took a nice pic and sent it to me. We zoomed back up the river in the dark, and I showered and crashed into bed, asleep within minutes.



A 4.30am start gave time for breakfast before we launched our boats for a morning assault on the river at 5am. We took two boats, me and Romzi (plus pilot) in one, and Jen, Eliza and Robert (plus pilot) in the other. The rationale was that although our initial objective was shared – Bornean Ground Cuckoo – we may have needed to split up later.

BGC is usually *the* target for hard-core birders visiting the Kinabatang River. Sure it has other amazing attractions, such as an array of hornbills and broadbills pretty-much unequalled elsewhere in the world, an excellent (if hard-to-see) array of pittas, and it is also just about the best place in the world to see the endangered Storm's Stork, still here in numbers. For non-birders it is the mammalian wildlife that brings in the punters: Pygmy Elephant, Proboscis Monkey and the main reason people flock here, the "man of the forest", Orangutan. Add to that the fun and easy way of birding – chuntering up and down the river in small boats – and you have a winning combination. But for birders, BGC is the reason this destination has to be on an itinerary. This is a bird that is large and gaudy, and its deep booming "Cu-cooo" can be heard for a few hundred metres, sending shivers down the spine of those that recognise it. But like others of its genus, it skulks on or near the forest floor, wary of anything at ground level in its territory, and so is a total bugger to see.

Almost certainly because of the unique way of seeing the wildlife, in recent years it's become apparent that BGC can in fact be seen well on the smaller tributaries that come off the KR between Sukau and Bilit. Birders in a boat are either not noticed, or simply not perceived as a threat in contrast to the way that someone on foot would flush a skulker.

The trip downriver took about half an hour at from 5.30 we drifted slowly up a tributary near Sukau quietly acquiring a good list of birds: **Stork-billed Kingfisher; Oriental Pied, Wrinkled, and Asian Black Hornbill; Dollarbird; Little Green Pigeon; Black-and-red Broadbill; Dark-throated Oriole.** My first lifer of the morning came in the form of a pair of endemic **Brown Barbets** at about 6am. A troop of **Short-tailed Macaques** moved noisily through the trees on the bank, and a **Rufous Woodpecker** showed briefly.



At 6.50 a **Banded Broadbill** showed well, and then a **Black-and-yellow** put in an appearance. Other birds observed included **Greater Racquet-tailed Drongo, Chestnut-breasted Malkoha, Buff-necked Woodpecker, House Swallow and Barn Swallow.** We heard, but could not lay eyes on, a Diard's Trogon, one I had been hoping for but which would have to wait for another trip. I didn't pay sufficient attention to **White-crowned Shama**, getting confused with the Shamas seen both on mainland Malaysia and Palawan and not realising this was a Bornean endemic. I had great views but failed to spend sufficient time trying for a good photo, an irritating oversight. A Chestnut-necklaced Partridge called from the forest and we tried to entice it close to the bank but without success. I found a cuckoo-shrike high up and got enough on it

to identify it as a lifer **Lesser Cuckoo-shrike**.

During this period, as we gradually worked our way upstream, we had been playing the BGC call regularly. It was not promising, and I was not buoyed by the news that in 3 days on the river the girls had heard it only once, at 11am the previous day. At around 7.30am the girls' boat pulled into the bank for them to disappear for a discrete break. An unusual noise was emanating from the jungle nearby and Robert was on the case – he had found a young **Orangutan** disturbed by our presence. To protect the girls' modesty I reluctantly waited until they had finished before piling in for a better view of one of my top targets for the trip. The Orang, probably a young female looked straight at us from about 7-8m away in a tree about 3m from the ground. Mostly she seemed nonchalant but occasionally she pursed her lips and made a kissing noise, presumably an alarm call of some kind. I filled my boots with pics using various different camera settings as insurance, and then left her in peace.



At 8am Robert announced he had just heard the BGC call. We all hushed and about 20sec later, distant but unmistakable, we too heard the deep boom. Now it was a case of working out the best strategy. We moved upstream towards the call some way, then found a suitable spot where we could “park” the boats and with a reasonably clear understorey. The tactic would be to call the bird in and watch from the boats, hoping it would come to the edge of the clearing to check out the intruder. For 15-20 min we sporadically played and heard answers, with the bird perhaps getting closer to us but still probably 60-100m away. Then another bird started calling, and as much as we played and were answered, neither bird would come any closer, perhaps too interested in each other to pay any attention to the third interloper. We also heard a Hooded Pitta but I was against diverting attention.

After an hour and half – during which time the birds called continually, and even shifted vocalisation to a trill and once or twice the grating alarm call, but still would come no closer – I turned to Romzi and suggested we go in. We were getting nowhere and I felt there was no prospect of them coming to us. He was against this and we stayed put for another 30mins with the same predictable result. But then at 10am, clearly also now resigned to the birds not approaching, he motioned to me that we should go in to the forest. Jen and Eliza followed (with Robert and the drivers staying with the boats) and we crept through the jungle for about 30-40m. We could hear it still calling and as we squatted to keep our forms as invisible as possible, Romzi played the alarm call. From barely 6m in front of us we heard the grating alarm sound and I peered with bins through the foliage trying to get a glimpse of the perpetrator, misplaced confidence that I *would* find it.

Suddenly Jen, about a metre to my right announced she had it. I could see where she was looking – basically the same place as me but I could see nothing; shit! it was obscured from my viewpoint. Within 5 seconds she had reached for her camera and fired off a “record shot” as I shuffled over as noiselessly as I could and tried to line up where she was pointing. I hissed for directions but there was nothing helpful. Is it left of or right of the L-shaped tree? No answer. Is it on the ground or above. No, it was above the ground. Are you still on it? No. And that was it, gone, or at least gone from this closest proximity spot.

I looked again at her photo and could see nothing even as I zoomed in on the LCD. She pointed to a smudge in the middle between two leaves and explained that was a window to its body but no head nor tail was visible. For just a few seconds she’d seen the head above some leaves, and the tail pumping behind, but the body was obscured, and by the time she fired off the shot a few second later it was already almost completely out of sight. I felt slightly better that the view had been crap, but still, Fuck! She could tick it and I could not! I had had nightmares about this. Maybe it was just bad luck, but I kicked myself because my skills and eyesight are not what I would like them to be. Romzi to my left saw nothing. I think that Eliza, on Jen’s right might have got enough on it for tick, but she was very quiet and had much less English than Jen so I couldn’t be sure.

The bird carried on calling in response to Romzi’s ipod, and remained close. But it was clear it now knew we were there, and the further we carried on into the jungle, the further away it went. At 10.40 Romzi decided unilaterally to knock it on the head. I overruled, reasoning that I was the paying punter and I had not seen it. We tried again for 30mins, and to his credit he did so in a professional manner, not like some guides I have come across who once they have lost interest also lose field craft. Nevertheless at 11.15 I called time. It had moved into denser forest and we were an hour from the lodge by boat. It would be raining soon. I tried hard to keep calm and to rationalise it but in fact I felt mildly nauseous.

As we returned to the river where the boats were waiting, Jen announced with excitement (as she was entitled to do) that she’d got the bird, to Robert’s obvious delight. Her words of comfort to me – “at least you heard it and came close on your first day: this is our 3rd day and only now have we got something to show for it” – were meant well, but only sounded patronising and hollow, and I felt bad for thinking this too. As we headed back I was glad it was just me and Romzi in our boat while the girls and Robert sped ahead with their 30hp outboard compared without 20hp unit. Back at the lodge waiting for lunch I inflicted further pain on myself looking at James Eaton’s photos that have pride of place in the dining room. What a stonking looking bird ☹️. At least I could try again tomorrow...

After lunch and a rest, marking time waiting for the regular downpour to rain itself out, at 15.50 I was back on the boat with Romzi. The girls went off in search of White-crowned Hornbills while I headed upstream to look for the herd of Elephants that had been regularly sighted on the banks over the last week or two. Romzi worried me with the news that they were known to have crossed the river the previous evening from a relatively open area where they were confined to the riverbank, to the jungle on the left bank, with the chance they would by now deep in the forest and unviewable.

Multiple dozens of **Little Green Pigeons** and **Pink-bellied Green Pigeons** were observed in a fruiting tree and bombing across the river. Romzi worked hard to turn one into a female Cinnamon-headed.

It was almost certainly not, but it was only in retrospect that I realised I did not pay sufficient attention at this moment, distracted by having dipped on the cuckoo and the possibility of now finding the elephants. Cinnamon-headed is fairly rare here and therefore would have been a valuable addition.

Raptors were to the fore, with **Brahminy Kites**, **Lesser Fish Eagles** and **Crested Serpent Eagles** taking advantage of the break in the rain and afternoon sun to perch out conspicuously, along with numerous **Dollarbirds**. I picked out a distant pair of small raptors high in a dead tree as **Bornean White-fronted Falconet**, another excellent lifer. I would love to have had closer views of these dainty, beautiful birds. As we headed upstream beyond Billit, Romzi pointed out various spots where there was evidence of the elephants. Their camp on the right bank was easily visible from the flattened areas of bamboo, as was the evidence of their crossing, with skid marks heading down the bank and then corresponding marks on the far side. At another spot we pulled into a small tributary and Romzi pointed out fresh marks where the herd had crossed heading upstream no too long ago – it was looking good.

As we rounded the next bend his shout went up and the pilot immediately killed the engine. Almost completely submerged, just bits of its back, head and trunk protruding, was a **Bornean Pygmy Elephant** bathing and munching away on bamboo stems below the surface. Now that we stopped to study it, we realised that in fact there were more, out of sight behind the bamboo, but crashing about feeding. Romzi suggested we row slowly around the bend, and as we did a clearing in the bamboo opened up before us with about a dozen elephants. On the right hand side a couple of young males, tusks starting to grow were feeding, while on the left a group of females became agitated at our presence and grouped together flapping their ears. Barely 10m from them, we drifted slowly with the river and I was rather concerned that had they charged us we would have been in deep shit! Romzi and the pilot were less concerned, presumably comfortable that as long as we were on the water and not provocatively approaching we would endure the threat but no physical action. The reason for their agitation became apparent as we drifted a little further away and they relaxed somewhat in our presence: two very cute calves were pottering about under their feet.



We left them in peace and headed back downstream, slowing to give directions to a few other boats that were now out hunting for the elephants. As we made our way back to KJC a pair of **Rhinoceros Hornbills** gave much better views than the silhouetted pair from the previous evening, along with the other three “common” taxa we’d seen already a few times, **Asian Black**, **Oriental Pied** and **Wrinkled**.



Although I had expected only one night trip included in my package, Robert was very happy for me and Jen to go out again for another try for Bay Owl. We scored a couple of **Buffy Fish Owl**, a heard-only **Large Frogmouth** whose form seemed to drift over us in the blackness, **Night Heron**, and – as we arrived back to KJC – the **Brown Wood Owl** was hanging around as usual.

Over a beer back in the dining area we discussed the plan for tomorrow. Eliza had left already so she could connect with an early flight from Sandakan the next morning. Jen needed to leave the camp by 10am for the same reason. I had arranged for my final morning to be at Sepilok, much closer to Sandakan, so my morning could be more leisurely. Fears that my hosts would try to get me into the same transfer as Jen for convenience and cost saving were completely unfounded – Robert explained that he had sorted out a car for Jen at 10am, and that I could go out with Romzi for a full morning on the river, and a separate car would be waiting for me immediately post lunch. Absolutely spot-on, customer focused planning!

8/11

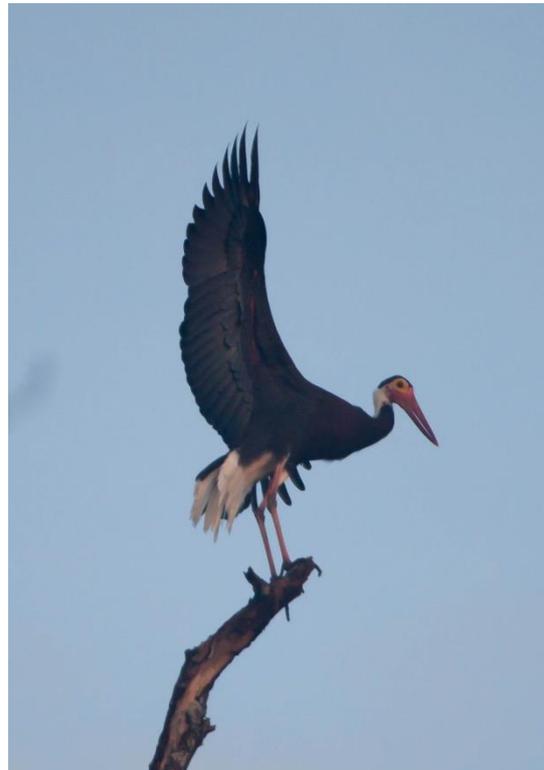
A slightly later start because of overnight and early morning rain had us on the river at 5.30. Jen headed upstream with Robert. Most of her targets were now either in the bag or consigned to the too-hard basket, so she'd persuaded Robert to take her on a low probability but high reward trip to a site where he'd recently seen Giant Pitta. Smarting from the dip the previous day (I still am as I write this some months later) I wanted another crack at BGC and so Romzi and I headed back downstream to Sukau.

As the sun started to peek out a large bird crossed the river in front of us. Excitedly Romzi indicated this was **Storm's Stork**, a bird I'd made clear to him was high on the list of ones I wanted from this final morning on the river. The brief, washed-out flight view was tickable, the dark breast distinguishing it from the larger Lesser Adjutant, but none of the interesting details was visible, so it was definitely in the BVD category. Another stork perched up high on a dead tree in typical fashion was a **Lesser Adjutant**, while shortly afterwards I picked out a bird that seemed good for **Bornean Black Magpie**, confirmed as we slowed and moved the boat closer.

At 6am, in slightly better light we found another two **Storm's Stork**, this time giving much better views, even if the light was not the best for photography. Now I could take in the large red bill, yellow ring around the eye, and smart black cap above the white head and neck. As well as being a striking looking bird, this stork is endangered, and the Kinabatang River is one of few sites where it remains in good numbers. As we neared Sukau a large flock of more than 60 **Long-tailed Parakeets** zoomed around, and we made an unscheduled stop at Romzi's house to pick up a spare battery. Alarmingly he'd asked me after we set out if I had a suitable USB cable for charging with me, because his speaker was almost completely drained. I had the kit needed, or even a speaker of my own, but of course all back in the room, 30minutes upstream. Without his speaker our chances of the BGC would be reduced even further to practically zero. Fortunately his family was able to dig out the necessary part, and he recharged the battery, in total costing only about 5-10minutes diversion.

By 6.30 we were making our way slowly up the tributary from yesterday's mega-dip. Romzi began occasionally playing the ground cuckoo on his speaker, but worryingly there was no response. He chose this time to worry me further with the information that it is fairly regular for birds to be quiet the day following an extended session of calling. Oh no!

We did accrue some good birds nonetheless. Black-and-red Broadbills were again common and conspicuous. I privately berated myself for dismissing them now, even though barely 36 hours earlier I'd been desperate to see one. It seemed to be the morning of the kingfisher: initially a **Stork-billed** dashed across the channel, followed by **Blue-eared**, and then one of my key targets, **Ruddy Kingfisher** (race *minor* of Borneo). Romzi heard the call and alerted me before we located it in flight then perched low over the water. It was obscured slightly but I still had good views of this beautiful jewel, its striking pink back appearing to take on a mauve cast in the dark forest light.



Plaintive Cuckoo was heard-only, its bi-syllabic rising and falling song very familiar from previous SE Asian birding, including day one in PICOP 2014, when it was just about our first bird. **White-chested Babblers** sang from every 20m or so on the bank and I made sure to get a decent view of one since I was fairly certain this would be a lifer.

We located both **Red-naped Trogon** and **Scarlet-rumped**, but not the one I most wanted Diard's. At 7.15 a **Malaysian Blue Flycatcher** put in a brief appearance, but by 8am we had still not heard BGC despite spending more than 90minutes in the same area as the day before. A **Moustached Hawk-cuckoo** distracted me for a while, and I finally located the source of the repetitive two note song, sitting unobtrusively in the mid-storey barely moving, but I was not so lucky with Sooty-capped Babbler which remained heard-only.

At 8.45 pecking on a tree trunk as we waited at the BGC site had us peering deep into some vines before locating a large olive woodpecker with a white nape and dark crown/crest. Reference to the field guide confirmed Romzi's suspicions that this was a female **Orange-backed Woodpecker**, a tricky bird to get.

At 9am, a single drawn-out note, plaintively descending, drifted through the forest. Romzi and the pilot looked at each and smiled at me: Giant Pitta. WTF! I listened intently and sure enough I heard it again. This time the signal made it to the right part of my brain and I was able to associate it with the recording that has lived on my phone for several years. Could we have a crack at it? Yes of course, was Romzi's immediate reply.

We pulled the boat into a convenient, very quiet backwater and played the call. Straight away it called back and was close. I was momentarily distracted by a **Blue-eared Kingfisher** that I noticed on a perch barely a few metres away and took a couple of pictures, but then the pitta called again even closer. It must be within eye-shot. Could we actually see this mythical beast? The understorey seemed too open for it to come any closer and us not see it, yet many much better birders than me have dipped on the Giant one. When Romzi announced he could see it, my head filled with a bizarre mixture of relief and the panic of yesterday when I could not instantly lock on. As he gave directions I scanned and then, at the base of a tree about 5m away, there stood a stocky, cream and blue stonker – a male **Giant Pitta**! He was somewhat obscured, and I soaked in as much as I could while the boatman quietly tried to manoeuvre the boat for a slightly better angle. As we did so, with a flick of its wings the pitta took a small jump, about a foot to the right.

Now, brilliantly, he was completely in the open and I took in the cream breast, dark eye-stripe, sweeping back and down towards a narrow black collar. I whispered expletive expressions of joy under my breath and I heard Romzi chuckling at my colourful language. As I basked in the view of this unexpected bonus mega-bird Romzi started whispering in an agitated fashion: "quick, get a picture, get a picture". I was torn by the desire to soak in every detail lest I not manage a decent image, and the thought of having this view permanently on my computer. My head spun – bins or camera, bins or camera? Amazingly the pitta stayed put for what seemed an age and I was able to raise the camera and fire off about 8-10 shots in the gloom of the forest floor. Even at ISO800 (the highest I really like to take my aging 50D) I could hear how slow the shutter-speed was, and I dared not look at the LCD.



The pitta moved to the right, calling regularly. The perch was now even closer, but not as clear. Several branches blocked my view of various bits of the bird's head as he moved around, initially facing us directly, then turning his blue back to us. I risked the camera's built-in flash to add just a little extra illumination and this pushed the shutter-speed up to a slightly better, but still mostly inadequate 1/60s. He started to circle us, adopting positions a bit further away, calling continuously and after I grabbed some atmospheric video on my compact Sony camera (mostly for the sound) we decided to leave him in piece. Romzi and the pilot were beaming and laughing, surprised by my vociferous, unbridled joy. A quick scroll through the pictures on the LCD and I realised I had got lucky – one or two of those pics might just stand being viewed at full size. High fives all round!

As we drifted back downstream from the pitta site, a Hooded Pitta called from the opposite bank, but I made it clear I was still focused on the quest for the Ground Cuckoo. We tried again at yesterday's site but it now seemed like Romzi's prediction of the birds being quiet would come to pass. At around 9.30 I suggested we move back downstream and try a new site. Another pitta calling was identified by Romzi as Blue-winged. We briefly tried to encourage it to come out in the open but the pitta-gods determined we'd had our slice of luck for the day, and it didn't even respond vocally to Romzi's recording.

Then at 10am, the deep booming call I'd been intently focused on all morning drifted down up the channel towards us. It was fairly deep in the forest, on the opposite side to yesterday's bird. There was no obvious landing spot or clearing so we positioned the boat under an overhanging tree on the opposite bank, played the call, and waited. A few minutes later he called again. To my ear he was now *much* closer, even though the volume was not much greater – I had the distinct impression it was a softer "anybody there" version of the call. Every sinew in my body was tense, scanning the edge of the forest on the far side of the channel about 6m away.

Romzi played his iPod again, but had not adjusted the volume, booming it out at the max we'd been using earlier. There was no response. We continued waiting, with regular runs through the recording, but there was still no response. It had slipped away. I looked at my watch – 10.30 – we would have maybe an hour more at most to try to get it back. But then the heavens opened. I could hear the roar approaching through the trees ahead of the rain's arrival and when it did arrive it took a mere 20 seconds to go from light spitting, to sheets water, opaque enough to cut us off from the forest visually and audibly. We hunkered under umbrellas. After a few minutes it eased to heavy rain rather than a torrent, but the signs were it was set in until the afternoon. Romzi suggested we head back and reluctantly I agreed – we would see nothing in this anyway. I kept my head down under the umbrella as we sped through unceasing rain for the next 45 minutes back to KJC. As I sat in the boat holding tight to my umbrella but getting wet in any case, I ran through the sequence again and again and could not escape the thought that we'd scared the bird off by playing the call too loudly.

I managed to dry off somewhat, and after a quick lunch (in which I showed off my Giant pics to Robert, who informed me he and Jen had dipped out) I was ready to board the boat for the short run back to Billit. Again it rained, but I'd had the foresight to borrow some bin-bags from the lodge to protect my optics and luggage against the worst of the weather. Around 3pm we rolled into the Sepilok B&B where I would stay tonight.

Despite having booked over the phone some weeks ahead (with the help of my Malaysian friend and colleague T-J to ensure there would be no language issues), they had no record of my booking. Fortunately they had plenty of space and soon I was walking the short distance to the famous Rainforest Discovery Centre, less than a km down the road (**Magpie Robin** noted during the walk), and birded there from 4 until it started to get gloomy at around 5.30.

It was all rather “un-birdy”. Up on the famous tree-top walkway a few small birds were flitting about but I was not really properly focused on identifying everything, hoping instead for one or more of the truly special birds here – a trogon or pitta or even better a Bristlehead – and this was in retrospect a mistake. A female leafbird might have been Greater or Lesser, a female sunbird went unidentified, and various bulbuls were not exciting enough to warrant the attention I should have given them. More attention-grabbing were two **Orangutans**, a mother and baby, feeding on fruit close to the walkway.



I headed down through the park to find the “Pitta trail” and “Ridge trail”, the former well known for Black-and-crimson Pitta, and the latter, my information suggested, my best bet for Bristlehead. I walked a few hundred metres along the pitta trail but heard very little. At the top where the trail narrows, turns right and goes steeply uphill, I turned back. Here **White-crowned Shama** and **Puff-backed Bulbul** proved to be among the few birds I positively identified, while the only highlight of the return journey, punctuated by the sounds of raucous Rhinoceros Hornbills, was **Olive-backed Woodpecker**.

Somewhat disappointed with my first encounter with RDC, I wandered back to the B&B, ordered a local curry on the recommendation of the waiter, and sat down with a beer and my field guide (working out, in the process, that I’d had **Plain** and **Brown-throated Sunbirds** on the canopy walkway). I used my need for a phone charger as a pretext to get chatting to a friendly pair of teen/20-something Scandinavian sisters who had arrived about the same time as me, both tall, slim, blond, and stunningly pretty. I found out were spending time travelling South East Asia and had arrived this morning from Mount Kinabalu. After a while chatting the older one asked me if I was a birder. Yes. “I told you so”, she turned to her sister and back to me. “I knew it, you are just like our Dad”. Talk about bursting my bubble. I just hoped that my face did not betray the inner deflation of a sad, middle-aged dude.

By 7.00pm I was back at RDC, fighting the nerves at being completely alone in almost complete darkness in the middle of the jungle. I wandered the trails for an hour, occasionally playing the call of either Bay Owl, Barred Eagle Owl or Brown Hawk Owl without much happening until I returned to the walkway, thinking about knocking it on the head. Then a Hawk Owl called. I tried to locate it, but though it was not far away, it was apparently quite deep in cover. I tried my recording, hoping to entice it out to investigate. This had the effect of bringing another, slightly more distant bird into the conversation, but both birds were staying firmly put in dense foliage. Numerous times I swept

the torch through the tree I was sure it was in, but no matter what angle I adopted I could not find the culprit. At 8.20pm, I gave up on the Hawk Owls and started walk back along the canopy walkway, when an upslurred *hwee-hwee* caught my ear. Flipping Oriental Bay Owl – you beauty!

However tonight was going to be one of those nights, giving me flashbacks to owl-less evenings and early mornings in the Philippines in 2010. It was certainly vocal, and even moved to different perches in response to my playback, but try as I might I could not get a view of the bird. It settled in a spot that was a bit too far from the walkway and inaccessible from the ground, and so at 9pm, I really did knock it on the head and walked back to the B&B where I showered and hit the sack.

9/11

I was woken at 4am by the sound of a pair of Hawk Owls calling just outside my window. Fighting back the urge to draw the sheets up over my head and get a bit more sleep, I pulled on my trousers grabbed my torch and wandered out into the garden. Sadly, it would be same story—my lack of skill and experience no doubt major contributors to my failure to find either bird in spite of them being in the one large tree next to my room.

There was now no point in going back to sleep, so I walked back to RDC, the first sign of dawn appearing as I arrived. As if to taunt me even more, yet another Hawk Owl called, but this was soon overtaken by the whooping songs of Bornean Gibbons echoing through the forest.

From the walkway I noted a distant raptor – a Hawk-eagle of some kind – that I later identified from photos as **Wallace's Hawk-eagle**, and I noted a few **Rhinoceros Hornbills** in flight. Once again there were a few leafbirds, sunbirds and bulbuls about, while down on the trail heading back to pitta-land I added **Back-and-red Broadbill**, **Raffles Malkoha** and heard Black-and-yellow Broadbill. A **Short-tailed Babbler** showed very well at the “top” of the pitta trail.

No pitta calling, no owls, no trogons, not enough attention to the small jobs. Things were not going well. I decided to carry on walking along the pitta trail where the path turned right and narrowed. By my reckoning I could manage to walk the entire trail and still make it back to the B&B to meet my car that I'd booked to take me to the airport in time for an 11am flight. But as the going got steeper and steeper, with still no birds, I changed my mind and retraced my steps back to the first bit of the pitta trail. I was on the verge of packing it all in early and heading back for a relaxed breakfast, but one last run through the tape seemed to elicit a response that might just be pitta-like. It was not the same as my recording – a clearly single-syllabled tone without the upward inflexion on my tape – but the context suggested strongly to me this was it. It appeared to be on the far side of a steep bank and would not come any closer. I gauged whether I could descend but it did not look sensible.

It would not approach, and eventually I gave up and started to walk down the trail away from the sound. After about 50m I noticed a path leading left and then doubling back, apparently down into the depression. Could I get access this way? I still had a bit of time up my sleeve, so I walked down now getting closer to the call. The path crossed a stream then turned up heading towards Sepilok Giant (a huge emergent **FIXME** tree) – the bird appeared to be off the trail here, but no amount of me looking for the right angle could get a view of anything, nor playback entice it to come closer.

I was now eating into my reserve time and resolved it would be “death or glory”. I scrambled my way off the trail and onto a steep bank covered in dense undergrowth. Vines wrapped their limbs

around my ankles, spider-webs tangled in my hair and eyes, and thorns clawed at my trousers – I didn't even consider leeches in my urgency – but I was getting closer. I scanned with renewed vigour but saw nothing until without warning the sound now came from further away. The bird was now mobile, obviously aware that something big and clumsy was bumbling about. I moved again in the direction of the sound but soon it was coming from another location up and behind me. WTF? I really had, had it now. I had no time left, was still half an hour from the B&B even if I walked as fast as possible back, and stuck in the dense jungle on a steep bank that did not look very inviting to descend. I decided to head up to intersect the trail I'd been on, feeling sure it was only about 20m above my head. Fortunately my instincts were right and I re-joined the trail, heading back down to the point I'd made my pitta-induced detour and back down to the stream, somewhat dejected.

Just as I crossed the stream, a clacking alarm call sounded, and something medium-sized – bombed across the trail. A trained my bins on a horizontal branch where I could make out a dark shape. As the image came into focus I realised I had just landed my bins on that bastard quarry that had given me the run-around for the last hour. You flipping beauty, **Black-and-crimson Pitta**. I now had a mere few seconds to enjoy its stunning black, deep blue and crimson plumage, a splash of iridescent blue on its wing coverts glowing in the gloomy forest. Before I could reach for the camera it flew to a more distant perch. I was able to follow, and to get a truly awful record shot, but that didn't matter – it was in the bag, and in the very nick of time. I almost sprinted all the way back to the B&B, packed my bags, grabbed a cup of coffee and then jumped into the car that was already waiting to take me to the airport.

Taxonomic list

[Chestnut-necklaced Partridge]	Fri am
Storm's Stork	A few seen on Sat am, last morning at KJC
Lesser Adjutant	One or two each day
Black-crowned Night Heron	Seen on the river on both night trips
Purple Heron	Common
Cattle Egret	
Great Egret	
Intermediate Egret	
Little Egret	
Oriental Darter	
White-fronted Falconet	I found a pair distant on a bare tree top on Fri afternoon
Jerdon's Baza	One on Thurs pm
Bat Hawk	Bonus bird on the drive in, just outside Kota Kinabatang
Brahminy Kite	Common
Lesser Fish- Eagle	Fairly common on the river
Crested Serpent-Eagle	First seen near Bat Hawk site and thereafter common
Wallace's Hawk-eagle	One at RDC Sun am, id from photos
Common Sandpiper	A couple of pairs seen in flight on the river
Spotted Dove	
Little Green Pigeon	Fairly common along the banks of main river
Pink-necked Green Pigeon	Only one positively identified, Fri pm
Green Imperial Pigeon	common

Long-tailed Parakeet	Seen Thurs pm and a large flock on Sat am
Moustached Hawk-cuckoo	I tracked down perpetrator of incessant call Sat am
[Plaintive Cuckoo]	
[Bornean ground Cuckoo]	Grrr
Chestnut-breasted Malkoha	Fri am
Raffles Malkoha	RDC, Sun am
[Greater Coucal]	KJC
[Oriental Bay Owl]	Tried hard to find one at RDC Sat night
Buffy Fish Owl	Common on the river at night. At least 4 seen.
Brown Wood Owl	Regular visitor to KJC
[Brown Boobook]	Heard at RDC and a pair duetted at Sepilok B&B
Large Frogmouth	Thurs night cruise. Heard Fri night
Glossy Swiftlet	KK airport
Asian Palm Swift	RDC, Sun am
Red-naped Trogon	Fri am
[Diard's Trogon]	Fri am, sadly this potential lifer not seen
Scarlet-rumped Trogon	Sat am
Dollarbird	Common along the river
Stork-billed Kingfisher	Regular on the tributaries
Ruddy Kingfisher	Sat am
Blue-eared Kingfisher	Streak on Fri am, seen well at GP site
Blue-throated Bee-eater	Fairly common
Bushy-crested Hornbill	On way in to KJC and on Sat am on way upstream to elephants
Oriental Pied Hornbill	Commonest hornbill on the river
Asian Black Hornbill	Thurs pm
Rhinoceros Hornbill	Distant silhouette Thurs pm, better on Fri pm, and also at RDC
Wrinkled Hornbill	Seen a few times along the river
Blue-eared Barbet	Seen silhouetted and called incessantly Fri pm
Brown Barbet	Fri am
Rufous Woodpecker	Fri am
Olive-backed Woodpecker	f, RDC, Sat pm
{{[Maroon Woodpecker]}}	Called on the Sukau tributary, id by Romzi/Robert
Orange-backed Woodpecker	f, Sat am
Buff-necked Woodpecker	Fri am
Grey-and-buff Woodpecker	Thurs at KJC lodge, then a flyover on Sukau tributary, Sat am
Dusky Broadbill	Thurs pm, Bilit tributary
Black-and-red Broadbill	Thurs pm, Bilit tributary
Banded Broadbill	
Black-and-yellow Broadbill	Head frequently on river, at KJC and RDC, seen Thurs pm
[Hooded Pitta]	Heard several times at the Sukau tributary
{{[Blue-winged Pitta]}}	Romzi heard on the Sukau trib
Black-and-crimson Pitta	Extended tape duel Sun resulted finally in last-minute views at 8.15
Giant Pitta	Male called and showed brilliantly on Sukau trib
Lesser Cuckoo-shrike	m, dark non-descript cuckooshrike high up on Fri am, Sukau
Dark-throated Oriole	Fri am, Sukau
White-breasted Woodswallow	On wires in the oil palm plantations between Sandakan and Bilit
Black-naped Monarch	One shot across Sukau trib, Fri am
Greater-racquet-tailed Drongo	A few
Slender-billed Crow	Common

Bornean Black Magpie	Sat am
Tiger Shrike	Barely tickable views from car between Kota Kinabatang and Bilit
Red-throated Sunbird	RDC, sun am
Crimson Sunbird	KJC, Thurs early pm
Plain Sunbird	RDC, Sun am
Lesser Green Leafbird	RDC (check on greater – dark line in primaries, but no noticeable yellow on throat)
Eurasian Tree Sparrow	
Crested Myna	A few roadside birds driving from Sandakan
Hill Myna	Sat am
Asian Glossy Starling	
Oriental Magpie Robin	One shot across road nr Sepilok B&B
White-crowned Shama	Fri, Sat and Sun am
Malaysian Blue Flycatcher	One on Sat am with Romzi
Black-headed Bulbul	
Puff-backed Bulbul	RDC
Hairy-backed Bulbul	RDC, Sun am
Bulbul sp. various	Let's face it, who gives a shit
Barn Swallow	
House Swallow	
Rufous-crowned Babbler	RDC, late afternoon
White-chested Babbler	Sukau trib
Short-tailed Babbler	RDC, Sun am
[Sooty-capped Babbler]	Sat am
{Ashy Tailorbird}	Romzi had one in the KJC grounds with the G-b W-p

33 lifers