On the Trail

Part Two of our extensive feature on Sabah’s Nature Reserve - one of South East Asia’s most beautiful and rewarding wildlife photography destinations

BORNEO’S KINABATANGAN
THE RIVER OF LIFE

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A beautiful female Rhinoceros Hornbill Buceros rhinoceros, easily identified by the pale blue, red-ringed eye. Males have black, unringed eyes instead.
The tranquil waters of the Menanggol flow slowly between two thick curtains of vegetation, offering unique vistas and exceptional wildlife sightings.
In the first part of our extensive feature about the Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary (see ANIMA MUNDI – Adventures in Wildlife Photography Issue 11) we have described in detail its coastal lowland and riverine forest environments, the wildlife which one can reasonably hope to see and photograph there and the general “feel” and atmosphere of this truly wonderful destination, one of South-East Asia’s best wilderness areas. For those interested in the bare facts, we follow up in this issue with a selected series of snippets from Wikipedia about the geographical and administrative aspects of the general area. This makes for “dry” and rather unappealing reading, but we realize that - for some reason - this part of the world (and Borneo in particular) still seems to be suffering from general preconceptions among the public. The island of Borneo is not peopled by man-eating carnivorous plants or head-hunting, blood-crazed savages: rather, it is a beautiful destination for wildlife and nature lovers, with very good (and occasionally truly superb) tourist infrastructures and very few practical difficulties. Read on...

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A sub-adult Saltwater or Estuarine Crocodile *Crocodylus porosus* basking on a muddy riverbank during the rainy season.
THE ADMINISTRATIVE AREA

The Kinabatangan district is located in Sandakan Division, in the east of Sabah, Malaysia on the island of Borneo. The district office is located in Kota Kinabatangan. Its population was estimated to be around 86,783 in 2000. Kinabatangan is mostly populated with ‘Orang Sungai’ (people of the river), one of the Indigenous Group in Sabah. Economic activities are centered around oil palm plantations, forestry and wood-based industries (we might add that palm oil plantations are also a major concern for the welfare of the local wildlife and the general environment of the Kinabatangan area, and that tourism now plays an important part in the local, small-scale economy, providing jobs to a large number of Orang Sungai). The nearby Kinabatangan River is an area with tropical lowland rainforest vegetation and ecosystems. The area is wet and humid and the swampy lowlands are home to Borneo’s indigenous Proboscis Monkey. Other places of interest in the area are the Gomantong Caves. The 78,000 hectares of the Kinabatangan and Segama rivers was gazetted in 2008 as “Kinabatangan-Segama Wetlands Ramsar site”. The recognition is significant, as the wetlands comprise rarely found coastal mangrove swamps and peat jungles.

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The slow-flowing Menanggol is at its atmospheric, mist-shrouded best in the very early morning hours.
The large and very active Grey-tailed Racer Gonyosoma oxycephalum is occasionally encountered within Borneo in its dazzling yellow color phase rather than its more common bright green one.
The Kinabatangan River (Sungai Kinabatangan) is located in Sabah, eastern Malaysia, on the island of Borneo. It is the second longest river in Malaysia, with a length of 560 kilometers from its headwaters in the mountains of southwest Sabah, to its outlet at the Sulu Sea, east of Sandakan. Kinabatangan is known for its remarkable wildlife and fascinating habitats such as limestone caves at Gomantong hill, dryland dipterocarp forests, riverine forest, freshwater swamp forest, oxbow lakes and...
Primates are very well represented in the Kinabatangan river basin area. Left, Long-tailed or Crab-eating Macaque Macaca fascicularis. Right, top, a female Proboscis monkey Nasalis larvatus; right, bottom, a juvenile Orangutan Pongo pygmaeus.
Stormy skies - heralding frequent and violent downpours - offer uniquely dramatic vistas along the Kinabatangan forest-fringed shores.
brackish mangrove swamps near the coast. The ecology of the upper reaches of the river has been severely disrupted by excessive logging and clearing of land for plantations. However, the original lowland forests and mangrove swamps near the coast have largely survived, provide sanctuary for a population of Saltwater Crocodiles (Crocodylus porosus), and contain some of Borneo’s highest concentrations of wildlife. Of special note are Borneo’s indigenous Proboscis

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Left, a tree-dwelling Grey-tailed Racer Gonyosoma oxycephalum in its yellow phase; right, the Buffy Fish-Owl Ketupa ketupu, a relatively common denizen of the riverine shores at night.
At dawn and twilight the pygmy elephants emerge from the forest.
The shores of the Kinabatangan are a true birdwatcher’s heaven. Far left, Rhinoceros Hornbill Buceros rhinoceros; left, Grey-headed Fish-eagle Ichthyophaga ichthyophaga.
monkeys, Bornean orangutan, Asian elephants, Sumatran rhinoceros and the endemic Borneo river shark. The area is also known for its great variety of birdlife. Each year, the lashing rains of the northeast monsoon cause the river to swell rapidly. Unable to disgorge into the sea quickly enough, the river frequently overflows its banks and spreads across the flat land of its lower reaches, creating a huge floodplain. The lower Kinabatangan teems with animal and plant life, making it the best area for viewing wildlife, not just in Sabah but all of Southeast Asia. In 1997, 270 square kilometres of the lower Kinabatangan floodplain were declared a protected area, and in 2001 this designation was upgraded to that of “bird sanctuary”, largely through the efforts of NGOs. Further efforts to have the area declared a Wildlife Refuge or even National Park had been however opposed by oil palm plantation owners seeking to expand their cultivated land. By August 2006, following media attention after a decapitated elephant’s head was found floating down the river, the area was
With the coming of the rains, reptile life literally explodes all over the river shores.
Herping heaven!
Top left, Mangrove snake Boiga dendrophila; top right, Harlequin Tree Frog Rhacophorus pardalis.
Bottom left, Borneo Spitting Cobra Naja sumatrana; bottom right, a rare Slender-tailed Wolf Snake Lepturophis borneensis.
The Kinabatangan is one of the best sites anywhere outside of Australia to see the Saltwater or Estuarine Crocodile Crocodylus porosus at close quarters in the wild.
gazetted under the State’s Wildlife Conservation Enactment of 1997 as the Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary. It is now under the purview of the Sabah Wildlife Department. Currently, most nature tourism is concentrated around Sukau, accessible by road and offering comfortable accommodation to visitors prepared to pay for well-managed tours. The most populated area and also the Central Administration for Kinabatangan is Kinabatangan town, along the Sandakan-Lahad Datu highway and about 90 kilometers from Sandakan Town. The largest cave system in Sabah, Gomantong Caves, can be found in this region.

GETTING THERE

For centuries, the rare treasures of Borneo’s forests acted like a magnet for traders in search of edible bird’s nests, rhinoceros horn, elephant ivory and hornbill casques for the Emperor and the wealthy mandarins of China. They also sought a hardwood resin, damar; flexible rattan vines; beeswax to make candles; fragrant woods and oil-rich illipe nuts. Today one can fly from Kota Kinabalu to Sandakan on Malaysia Airlines, whilst those from Kuala Lumpur can take direct daily flights to
Top left, Sphynx Moth *Daphnis hypothous*; top right, an unidentified species of Pyralidae. Bottom left, Assassin bug *Eulys amoena*; bottom right, Sphynx Moth *Ambulyx substrigilis*.
A rare encounter with the mildly venomous, tree- and ground-dwelling Black-headed Cat snake Boiga nigriceps.
Sandakan on AirAsia. Alternatively, one can take an air-conditioned coach to Sandakan or Lahad Datu from Kota Kinabalu. One can also take a ferry to Sukau from the Sandakan harbour. The Kinabatangan region can be visited all year round, though it is often flooded during the wettest part of the year in December and January. The main flowering and fruiting season, from April to October is generally fairly dry and a good time to spot many birds and animals. During the northeast monsoon, from November to March, there are often heavy showers during the afternoons, particularly during December and January. During the rainy season, however, it is possible to negotiate many of the river channels leading into the oxbow lakes, where there is a greater concentration of wildlife.

The strange-looking Penthecodes farinosa, a rare Fulgorid planthopper which is occasionally observed on tree trunks in the riverine rainforest of the Kinabatangan.
Life in the tree-tops. Left, Orangutan *Pongo pygmaeus*, an adult female with her baby; middle, a female *Rhinoceros Hornbill* *Buceros rhinoceros*; right, Long-tailed or Crab-eating *Macaque* *Macaca fascicularis*. 
A large Estuarine or Saltwater crocodile Crocodylus porosus lurks among a patch of the introduced and highly invasive Water hyacinth Eichhornia crassipes.
Large Cat snakes belonging to the genus Boiga are very common along the Kinabatangan’s forested shores. Left, a stunning Mangrove snake Boiga dendrophila; right, a Dog-tooth Cat snake Boiga cynodon.
Observing at close quarters the Smooth Otter *Lutra lutrogale* perspicillata is largely a matter of luck - and perseverance. This is an exceptionally active and inquisitive riverine species.
Top left, Colugo or Flying Lemur Cynocephalus variegatus; top right, Stork-billed Kingfisher Pelargopsis capensis; bottom right, Black-and-red Broadbill Cymbirhynchus macrorhynchos; bottom left, Temple Pit viper Tropidolaemus subannulatus.
The Water Monitors, *Varanus salvator* sub. *macromaculatus* of the Kinabatangan river basin can reach a remarkable size (often over 200cm) and a very heavy weight (more than 20kgs).

Prehistoric-looking giant reptiles ambling along the riverbanks.
Left, Rhinoceros Hornbill Buceros rhinoceros; middle, Great Egret Egretta alba; right, a Crested Serpent Eagle Spilornis cheela with its snake prey.
Estuarine or Saltwater crocodile (Crocodylus porosus) are best observed when basking on mud riverbanks exposed by receding tides. Low water levels are supposed to be ideal, but we had some of our best sightings at the peak of the rainy season in January.
The best wildlife viewing opportunities are offered when exploring the waterways in very small groups and in a private boat.
Left, a subadult male Temple Pit viper *Tropidolaemus subannulatus*; right, a female Long-tailed or Crab-eating Macaque *Macaca fascicularis* with her day-old baby.
Absolute silence and floating noiselessly downstream with a switched-off engine are mandatory if one wants to approach really closely the Estuarine or Saltwater crocodile Crocodylus porosus of the Kinabatangan. In a few instances we have actually got within touching distance of these truly impressive predators.
Bornean Pygmy Elephants, *Elephas maximus borneensis*, can also be approached very closely by boat when grazing by the river’s edge.

Face to face with the endemic Pygmy elephants of Borneo.
Top left, Prevost's Squirrel *Callosciurus prevostii*; top right, Harlequin Tree Frog *Rhacophorus pardalis*. Bottom right, Blue-eared Kingfisher *Alcedo meninting*; bottom left, Harlequin Tree Frog *Rhacophorus pardalis*. 
Varanus salvator can often be approached very closely as they forage for frogs and crabs in shallow water by the river’s edge.
A cosmopolitan but nevertheless impressive and very elegant species, the Great Egret *Egretta alba* is often observed at the water’s edge.
Left, Prevost’s Squirrel
Callosciurus prevostii; center, Proboscis monkey
Nasalis larvatus; right, Rhinoceros Hornbill
Buceros rhinoceros.
The Kinabatangan is one of the last - and possibly the most important - strongholds of the Estuarine Crocodile Crocodylus porosus in Borneo.

Dark, deep waters where great Saltwater Crocodiles lurk in silent, patient wait.
The human-like, penetrating gaze of an adult male Proboscis monkey Nasalis larvatus - this is the Alpha male of the troop, easily identified by the large nasal appendage which has suggested its popular name.
Strictly herbivores, Proboscis monkeys Nasalis larvatus can however display an impressive set of canine teeth, especially prominent in mature males. Notice the bright red penis of the specimen, which in males of this species appears to be permanently erected.
Sexual dimorphism in the Proboscis monkey Nasalis larvatus is particularly accentuated, with adult dominant males (left) sporting huge nasal appendages and round, protruding bellies. Juveniles and females (right) are slimmer and with a much smaller nose.
Whiskered Tern \textit{Chlidonias hybridus}, a simply elegant bird which seems almost out of place in the general visual exuberance of its exotic brethren in the area.

The exquisite elegance of the Whiskered Tern in the oxbow lagoon.
Two more portraits of a Proboscis monkey Nasalis larvatus Alpha male show to advantage the range of facial expression and the exquisite coat of this extraordinary primate species.
Quiet, dark corners where forest and river meet along some of the Kinabatangan’s smallest tributaries offer great photographic opportunities. This is an Estuarine or Saltwater crocodile Crocodylus porosus basking on muddy riverbank and being reflected in the still waters of the Menanggol.
A close-up portrait of a large Water Monitor Varanus salvator. The fly perched on the back of its neck gives a good idea of the large size of this impressive, fast and agile reptilian predator.
A portrait of Bornean Pygmy Elephants Elephas maximus borneensis as they graze by the Kinabatangan’s shore in a late May afternoon. By careful and very cautious manoeuvring one can get within touching distance of these impressive animals, but one should never underestimate their irritability and offensive potential - safety always comes first!
A large and possibly gravid Trimeresurus subannulatus female - the most common of Borneo’s Pit vipers and an amazingly beautiful species.
Night walks in the Abai area - when feasible - offer wonderful macrophotography opportunities, despite the omnipresent (but harmless) leeches. Left, a large Stick Insect; right, a dangerously venomous Giant Centipede Scolopendra sp., whose bite invariably causes excruciating, long-lasting pain.
At the end of the rains, in April-May - juveniles of all species abound. This is a very young Striped Bronzebreast *Dendrelaphis caudolineatus*. 
The lazy, sprawled posture of this basking Saltwater crocodile *Crocodylus porosus* belies its lightning speed in attack and flight alike. Never try to get close to one if you are not on a safe boat with an experienced guide.
USEFUL TIPS FOR YOUR EXPEDITION

Some simple, common sense, field-tested advice and information to make the best out of your trip and avoid hassles, worries and problems

ROUTE: You will probably arrive in Kota Kinabalu - Sabah’s capital city - with a flight originating from Kuala Lumpur or Singapore. From KK it’s a short 45 mins domestic connecting flight to Sandakan, the coastal town on the Sulu Sea where you’ll be spending one or two nights to recuperate before moving on - by car or boat - to the Kinabatangan. Once in Sandakan you might also want to stay longer and visit the Sepilok-Kabili Forest Reserve, which hosts an Orangutan Rehabilitation program.

MEANS OF TRANSPORT: The Kinabatangan is reached by private car or by river launch and is mostly explored by river boat, with a few occasional short forest walks thrown in (especially at night). All riverside lodges in Sukau offer boat trips [in groups], but if you are serious about your photography rent your own river boat with a private guide and an experienced boatman - it really does make a difference. For all bookings we can safely recommend our friend and professional photographer Cede Prudente’s company North Borneo Safari, the most reliable and experienced wildlife tour operator in town.

ACCOMODATION: The Kinabatangan river basin offers a large number of basic, no-frills campsites and several more expensive lodges, both in Sukau and in Abai. Lodges proper are usually very comfortable, spotlessly clean and just by the river’s edge. We can safely suggest the lovely and very comfortable Bukit Melapi/Proboscis Lodge, where we usually stay when we visit the area.

FOOD: Malaysians - and Sabahans in particular - love to eat! You’ll have lots of fresh vegetables, great tropical fruit, tasty fish soups, plenty of squid and prawns (try the local river variety - you’ll also support the local economy) and lots of steamed/grilled fresh
seafood. Food is perfectly safe (and not too spicy, if you’re squeamish about that aspect - we aren’t!).

**LANGUAGE:** Bahasa Malaysia and English, which is perfectly spoken in all lodges and by all guides.

**WORRIES:** None whatsoever. Borneo has a romantic film-image of steaming, forbidden jungles and savage head-hunters, but in fact the Malaysian states of Sarawak and Sabah (which are part of the island of Borneo together with the Sultanate of Brunei and the Indonesian region of Kalimantan) are well-developed (some might say too much) and well-organized. Crime is almost non-existent, food is wonderful and tourism is very well cared for. Once in a few years there are spats of spasmodic violence (mostly kidnappings) in the coastal islands by pirates from the Sulu Sea, but these occurrences are rare and there are Army detachments to stand guard.

**HEALTH:** We have been visiting regularly Borneo for the past twenty years - sometimes twice a year! - and we haven’t been sick once, despite having been all over the place and having been bitten by scores of mosquitoes. Leeches - in case you worry - are perfectly harmless and do not transmit any dangerous tropical disease. Just be careful with the sun (one can get easily sunstroke if going on long boat trips without a hat) and follow the usual precautions regarding street food and drink. Water served in the lodges is usually perfectly safe to drink.

**CLIMATE:** Equatorial lowland coastal forest - very humid, occasionally extremely hot, with frequent torrential downpours and extensive flooding during the rainy season from November to March. Nothing to worry about anyway, as you won’t be doing too much walking in the forest - river trips in the early morning or at night can even be surprisingly cool.

**BESIDES:** Sabah has much to offer to the adventurous traveler and the wildlife enthusiast - we usually suggest to pick a destination and stick to it for at least a couple of weeks, but if you want to squeeze the most out of your stay (and your international flight) you might want to visit several other National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries - such as the demanding and exhilarating Mount Kinabalu (near Kota Kinabalu), the pristine and remote Danum Valley (see our feature on issue 1 of ANIMA MUNDI) or Tabin Forest Reserve. Opportunities for wildlife photography enthusiasts are endless! Sabah also boasts some stunning seaside locations - one can indulge in world-class scuba diving at Pulau Sipadan, Pulau Mabul or Layang Layang atoll, or opt to relax by the beach on private, exclusive islands such as Pulau Lankayan or Pulau Mantanani. Whatever your decisions will be, you won’t be disappointed - this we can guarantee!