

Borneo Wildlife

Orangutans, Primates and Rainforest



In 1858 English naturalist Alfred Wallace formulated his theory of evolution through natural selection—independent of Charles Darwin. Borneo was his “Galápagos.” While Wallace encountered the impenetrable jungle and hostile headhunters of yesteryear, today the island offers many photogenic rewards to traveling photographers—in relative ease and comfort—while still providing a wonderful sense of adventure.

The Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak lie on the northern perimeter of Borneo—the third largest island on earth. This is the most biodiverse rainforest on the planet, with hundreds of tree species in each square mile. Over 100 species of orchids have been catalogued on a single mountain and extensive tree fern forests cover the wettest terrain. Collectively, the forests here house a fantastic assortment of endemic animals. None are as well-known as the orangutans—Asia’s shy “Man of the Woods”—the great red apes that dwell deep within Borneo’s remote and steamy forests.

For a long time orangutans were known only from the sketchy encounters of Western explorers. In recent years, orangutans have been the subject of extensive scientific study, and are now one of the world’s better known primates. Unfortunately, human abductions of young “orangs” from their mothers for the pet and zoo trade, and habitat loss due to logging and expanding oil palm plantations, have reduced orangutan populations and created numerous orphaned animals.

Our first photographic encounters with orangutans begin with a visit to the popular Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre. Here, orphaned young orangs are kept safe within a large protected natural environment where they are prepared to be reintroduced to the wild. We photograph these engaging primates in an open setting during their twice-daily feedings.



The Bornean Sun Bear Conservation Centre is immediately adjacent to Sepilok. The center is another wildlife rehabilitation facility dedicated to the care and release of orphaned and ex-captive sun bears back into the wild. At the center we learn about the world's smallest bear species and create hard-to-get images of these otherwise reclusive animals within the semi-natural setting of the center.

The Kinabatangan River is the longest river in Sabah and known for the highest concentration of primates in northern Borneo. The forest here is secondary forest, colonized by a significant quantity of "cluster fig" trees (*Ficus racemosa*)—a preferred food source for a wide variety of wildlife. Our focus in this area concentrates on photography from a boat. Wildlife we can expect to encounter along the river and surrounding forest includes orangutans, silvered langurs, proboscis monkeys, pygmy elephants, and several showy species of hornbills—to name just a few.



After our stay at the Kinabatangan River, we are off to the Tabin Wildlife Reserve. Four-wheel-drive safari vehicles are our photographic platforms as we search for images within Sabah's largest wildlife reserve. The roadways allow light to penetrate into what could otherwise be a dark, jungle world. We take advantage of this light on game drives searching for the area's notable species—Müller's Bornean gibbons, leopard cats and hornbills. Of course, we cannot pass up the opportunity to get out on a night drive to locate some of the reserve's intriguing nocturnal denizens.

Our photography in the remote Danum Valley takes place on foot along a network of well-maintained trails that radiate from our luxurious jungle lodge. We spend three full days exploring the local nature trails with a guide, all the while keeping an eye out for species such as maroon langurs, orangutans, cats, civets, colugos, and more. Birdlife is especially diverse, with 275 recorded species. A wonderful network of canopy walks among the tree tops is a fantastic way to get a birds-eye view of the forest while nature trails near the lodge also provide good opportunities for nighttime photos.

Tour Itinerary

Day 1

Depart home.

Day 2

We lose this day as we cross the International Dateline on flights originating from North America and Europe.

Day 3 (Sep 7)

Upon arrival at Sandakan, Malaysia, you are met by our representative and transferred to our overnight lodging. We meet for dinner, an orientation and, perhaps, a short night walk. (D)

Day 4

We start our day with a dawn walk high in the treetops on a remarkable stable canopy-viewing structure from which to photograph canopy birds and arboreal mammals. After breakfast we visit Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre where captive and orphaned young orangutans are prepared for reintroduction into the wild. Here, a large opening in the forest provides the photography experience as the orangutans are fed, providing great close-up photography. While Sepilok is a busy tourist attraction, and not a true "nature" experience, it yields some of the best orang portraiture to be found in Borneo.

Later in the afternoon, we take a photo walk within Sepilok Forest Reserve for an introduction to photographing Borneo's forest inhabitants. We end our day with a canopy walk at dusk to see giant flying squirrels emerging from their nests to begin their nightly rounds. (BLD)

Day 5

After an optional dawn birding walk and breakfast, we head to the Bornean Sun Bear Conservation Centre. With private access and a guided tour by its founder, we learn about sun bear conservation issues and the center's mission of providing safe sanctuary for ex-captive sun bears in large forest enclosures to facilitate their rehabilitation back into the wild. The semi-natural setting here allows for unparalleled photography of these reclusive rescued bears.



Following our morning sun bear photo encounter we continue our journey on the Kinabatangan River,

home to one of the highest concentrations of wildlife in Borneo. The river provides great access into this diverse forest habitat where ten species of primates make their home. Bird species here number more than 200, and include Storm's stork, crested serpent eagle, gray-headed fish eagle, brahminy kite, black-and-red broadbill, scarlet-rumped trogon, hooded pitta, buffy fish owl, long-tailed parakeet, maroon woodpecker, Asian paradise flycatcher, and eight species of hornbills.

After settling into our lodge we explore the area on an evening river cruise to photograph pygmy elephants, orangutans, silvered langurs, proboscis monkeys and birds. After dinner, a night walk provides an opportunity to photograph some of the area's nocturnal fauna, such as slow loris, western tarsiers, civets, and others. (BLD)

Day 6

Dawn on the Kinabatangan River is best photographed with a morning cruise to capture sunrise and the early morning wildlife activity along the river's shores. From our boat we continue our photography of orangutans, monkeys and elephants, along with the myriad bird species that call the river home.



Just a short boat ride and a 15-minute overland transfer brings us to the Gomantong Caves. These massive limestone caves are an amazing experience by themselves and the surrounding reserve affords great wildlife photography of orangutans, maroon langurs and hornbills, along with a mix of other bird species that have become habituated to the presence of people in the area. Almost a million swiftlets nest in the caves and we may see nest collectors climb rickety ladders and ropes to harvest the solidified saliva nests for bird's nest soup, a delicacy in China. We spend an afternoon photographing around the reserve and caves, ensuring that we are in place to watch the bat exodus. At dusk a torrent of over a million bats pour from the caves to spread out and feed over the river and surrounding jungle during the night.

While short morning jungle walks allow us the chance to photograph the forest and its inhabitants, our day doesn't end when the sun goes down. After dinner grab your macro lens and flash as we head out on a night walk to work on our macro photography with the jungle's reptiles and amphibians. During our days here we also experience nocturnal animals on a night cruise on the river. (BLD)

Day 7

We head into the heart of Borneo's largest reserve. Tabin Wildlife Reserve is home to a plethora of wildlife

including ten primate species—with orangutans, Hose's langurs and Müller's Bornean gibbons—five cat species, more than 220 species of birds, pygmy elephants, and banteng, a species of wild cattle.



After lunch we begin our photographic exploration of the reserve. Access by open sided 4x4 vehicles gives us the best vantage to search for and photograph bearded pigs, troops of pig-tailed and long-tailed macaques, leopard cats, common palm civets, flying squirrels and binturongs. Photography along the route of our drives is quite good as the tree canopy gap above the road provides overhead light to illuminate our subjects. (BLD)

Day 8

This morning we hike to one of the reserve's mud volcanos where salt enriched mud bubbles to the surface. These mud pots attract a great array of animals and birds to photograph, most notably Müller's Bornean gibbons, pygmy elephants, leopard cats and hornbills.

Along with our day and night safari drives, there is time explore the diverse primary forest and the nature trails surrounding our lodge either as a group with a local guide or, if you prefer, on your own. (BLD)

Day 9

Today we make the bumpy four-hour drive to the wild and dramatic Danum Valley. The world-famous Borneo Rainforest Lodge is our setting for the next three full days of exciting photography. This luxury lodge is known for the surrounding expanse of 150 square miles of undisturbed primary lowland rainforest and its approachable photogenic wildlife. In the evenings we venture out on night walks to experience the forest as it comes alive with nocturnal wildlife. (BLD)

Days 10-13

Our days in the Danum valley are spent walking the well-maintained (but occasionally muddy) forest trails adjacent to the lodge. The trails allow for easy access to the uniquely diverse and habituated wildlife of the area.

There are more than 30 resident orangutans around the lodge—so there is always something close by to



keep us busy. Because no hunting is allowed, the orangutans are very comfortable around people. Other notable species here include maroon langurs, hornbills, gibbons, deer and owls, many of which are habituated and can also be found near the lodge.

Additionally, for photographers interested in smaller fauna—snakes, lizards, insects and frogs—wonderful macro photo opportunities are available. A small pond near the lodge has a variety of frog species and is a great source of photography subjects.

An optional moderately challenging hike to a nearby waterfall yields attractive images, and a fantastic canopy walkway allows unique access to the little-known canopy world of Borneo's lowland rainforest. (BLD)

Day 14

With an early wake up and a predawn drive to the top of the Danum Valley overlook, we enjoy a continental breakfast while photographing the sunrise. As the photogenic mist slowly burns away, it reveals the classic view of the green forested valley below. After our leisurely sunrise shoot we return to the lodge with time for one more photo walk before we resume our travels with a drive to Lahad Datu Airport and our flight to Kota Kinabalu. (BLD)

Day 15 (Sept 19)

After breakfast, we transfer to the airport for flights home. (B)

Trip Details

Sep 05 - Sep 19, 2020

Fee: \$8,995

Deposit: \$1,000

Limit: 12 participants

Activity Level: Moderate

CONTACT US ABOUT THIS TRIP

Tour Leader



JEFF VANUGA

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