

Tabin Wildlife Field Trip – 28th - 30th May 2011

It was still dark outside as we climbed out of bed and showered before heading to Terminal 1 at Kota Kinabalu International Airport to catch our early morning flight to Lahad Datu on the East Coast of Sabah.

Kelvin Kueh, Sabah's herpetological expert (frogs to the layman) accompanied the six of us on our flight, and MAS Wings left on time on a slightly cloudy, misty morning.

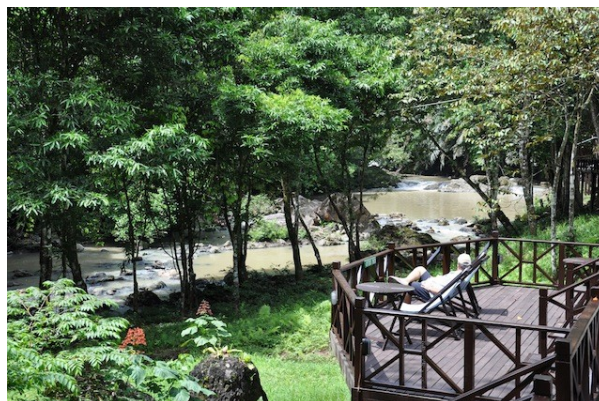
Our flight banked to the right after take-off from KKIA, before straightening out and heading east. The flight lasted approximately 45 minutes, and we were treated to a spectacular view of Mt Kinabalu to the left of the aircraft. We looked down on the magnificent forests of Mt Kinabalu, but not long after, the terrain changed, and soon the monotonous lines of palm oil plantations were all we could see in every direction.



Lahad Datu is a small, pretty town, with an even smaller airport, and within no time we had landed, collected our luggage and been met by the friendly and knowledgeable staff from Tabin Wildlife Resort. A convoy of two vehicles set off, and we were advised that due to extremely bad road conditions we would have to take a different, slightly longer route.



We drove along through the never ending oil palm plantations on deeply rutted dirt roads, seeing clumps of palm oil fruit sitting by the side of the road waiting to be collected by truck, until eventually in the distance our guide pointed out Tabin Wildlife Reserve. It is over 112,000 Hectares in size, and was declared a natural heritage park over 40 years ago.



At registration we were given a copy of “Tabin” – an excellent book written by Wendy Hutton - and a welcome drink, before being driven down to our River Cabins. The rooms have a wonderfully calming ambience, and look out directly over the river into thick jungle, giving a feeling of privacy and of being away from the madding crowd. I could have spent hours just sitting on our balcony watching the silvery-caramel coloured water flow by.



After a relaxing morning, which included exploring around the resort, we gathered at the open air restaurant for an excellent buffet lunch.



That afternoon, once the bite of the sun’s rays had tempered, we set off in the back of a Toyota truck to visit the mud volcano at Tabin. The road was extremely bad, and our hearts were in our mouths as the four wheel drive Toyota tackled the deep, slippery ruts on the track in front of us, as we clung on for dear life in the back of the truck. However, our excellent driver never put a tyre wrong, and soon we were disembarking at the track which would lead

us up to the volcano.

We had all been kitted out with gumboots and we soon realised why, as we trekked up the muddy path through the forest. A high lookout has been built near the volcano and we



climbed up and up to the top. The view out over the mud volcano and jungle was spectacular. However, apart from a family of Hornbills we were unlucky not to see any other wildlife. The mud on the volcano was very dry, with only a small area of mud plopping its way up to the top, proving that there was indeed some volcanic activity deep down below, and a storm was brewing, which may also have kept animals away.



As dusk fell, we set off back down the path back to the Toyota. The rain had now started, and the thunder rumbled ominously in the distance. Lightning lit up the trees of the forest as we carefully stepped through the mud, shining our torches to see the way. In the middle of all

this, Kelvin, our amazing frog expert, suddenly stopped and excitedly said he had found a frog!! We were in total amazement, as we could barely see where we were going, let alone find a 3 cm frog! We all stopped, as the rain poured down on us, whilst Kelvin brought out a small plastic bag into which he blew air and then carefully deposited the frog, explaining to us the scientific name and attributes of the frog. As the lightning flashed and thunder crashed around us, closer all the time, Kelvin took out his GPS to ensure he had all the necessary scientific data he needed to show the co-ordinates and the altitude at which he had found the frog, and also to check the humidity at the time (which was very high!). By the time we reached the truck Kelvin had found yet another frog, and both were safely bagged for our workshop on frog photography the next day.

Back at the resort we had a quick shower to warm up and dry off before a much needed dinner at the restaurant. We all tucked happily into our meal, washing it down with beer and wine, as the friendly staff looked after us!



Kelvin had planned a “frogging” session that evening, in order to catch a few more frogs for the photographic session the following day, and around 9.00pm he, our guide and I set off into a swampy area a few minutes’ walk from the restaurant.

Try as I might, shining my torch on this dark night into nooks and crannies around trees and in the ponds, I could not find any frogs, but Kelvin’s skills were obvious, as within about an hour, three more different species of frogs were safely bagged, and we headed back to the resort.

As I slid into bed close to midnight, exhausted after our early start, jungle trekking and then frogging, I exhorted Pete not to wake me up in the morning on any condition, so that I could catch up on lost sleep.

The next thing I knew I was jolted awake with an incessant loud banging going on in our room. Ready to admonish Pete for waking me, I opened my eyes to see him laughing, whilst he explained that a large hornbill had landed on the balcony and started banging its beak on the window! It was only 6.20am! Later at breakfast Maimie showed us the photographs she had taken of the same hornbill that had come knocking on her window after it left ours! It and a mate then settled in a tree on the other side of the river.

After breakfast, our very knowledgeable guide took us for a walk around the vicinity of the Resort, and was soon cupping his hands together and calling the Gibbon monkeys from the jungle. Sure enough, fifteen minutes later we heard their unmistakable voices responding to his call and we watched them frolicking high in the trees above the river. A little later Ritzi and Don spotted two Hornbills very high up in a tree near to our River Cabins, and we craned our necks to watch them.



Later that morning we walked down to the office at the entrance to Tabin where our frog photography lesson was to take place. After a general introduction on the skills and equipment needed to photograph frogs, Kelvin set up our “studio”, which consisted of a chair covered in non-reflective black material. Each frog had to be gently washed before being photographed. This was for two reasons – firstly the frogs feel more relaxed and comfortable after their “bath” and will “sit” more happily for the photographic session, and secondly to bring out the superb colouring and patterns on each of the frogs.

Kelvin explained that each frog must be positioned in its natural environment – leaves for tree frogs; rocks, dead leaves and sticks for ground and water frogs, etc. We learned how to hold frogs – which was gently by a back leg.



The morning was great fun, as all of us amateur photographers clicked away at all the frogs.



Occasionally a frog would jump off the “set” and we would all be chasing it around the studio! Having never picked up a frog in my life, I now feel very comfortable doing so, and

can understand some of Kelvin's passion for his frogs! His total enthusiasm, knowledge and capability to talk in layman's terms to us, made the whole morning both educational and a lot of fun!

Later that afternoon we were very fortunate to visit the Rhino Conservation programme that is being undertaken at Tabin. This special visit had been organised for us prior to our arrival. The elderly female rhino that used to reside at Lok Kawi Wildlife Reserve in Kota Kinabalu has been brought to Tabin, where she is in a very nice environment, well looked after and has put on weight since her transfer. A bull rhino roams in about 3 acres of forest jungle surrounding the conservation programme, and each evening, between 4 and 4.30pm he arrives back "home" to have his bath, be fed and spend the night in a secure area. The next morning he heads back out to forage in the jungle. As we arrived at the Conservation area our vehicle drove through a ditch filled with water and disinfectant, and we also rinsed our shoes in disinfectant prior to getting anywhere near to the rhinos.

We waited in anticipation for the rhino's arrival, and sure enough at 4.30 we heard a rustling in the undergrowth, some snorts, and then he appeared through the thick vegetation. He immediately smelt our presence, and stopped for a while before making his way warily into his enclosure. We were thrilled to watch him as the staff gave him his bath (which he obviously thoroughly enjoyed!), and as he tucked into a copious amount of leaves from a local tree. Coming myself from East Africa, where African rhinos are also so badly threatened with extinction, it was a wonderful feeling to be up so close and personal to an Asian Rhino.



Immediately following this amazing experience, we headed back to the Resort where a larger truck, with raked rows of seating in the back, was waiting to take us off on a combined "Dusk and Night Drive". We drove along one of the roads leading out of Tabin – on one side were the ubiquitous palm oil forests, and on the other the pristine forests of Tabin. Electric wires have been erected along the edge of the palm oil plantations to stop the Pygmy elephants raiding to eat the fruit. However our guide explained that the elephants have already worked out that they can just push over the wooden posts, avoiding the electric wires as they do so, and then carefully walk over the wires, so they don't get shocks! Amazingly clever animals! We saw numerous birds and it was just a wonderful feeling driving along in the cool late afternoon on the back of the truck looking out at the jungle. As day turned to night, our guides switched on their powerful spotlights and scanned the trees in the dark night. How on earth our guide spotted the little Lemur clinging to a tall tree about 50 metres away from us I

have no idea! However our driver stopped the truck, switched off the engine, and our guide assured us that if we waited the Lemur would glide from one tree to another. We didn't have to wait long, and we watched in amazement as the little mammal swooped down and across to the other tree, which was a considerable distance away!

Within ten minutes we were once again stopping, this time to watch a large Flying Fox squirrel, which swept across the jungle, looking as if it was flying like a bird. It was pitch black and the stars were crystal clear in the night sky. We stopped for one last look. Being virtually on the equator, it is possible to see most of the stars from both hemispheres. We sat in silence for a few minutes drinking in the beauty of the night sky and feeling in awe of the immense size of the galaxy out there.

It was time to be heading back, but there was still more to see, and we were lucky enough to spot two Leopard Cats running away from us on the side of the road.

We arrived back at the Resort happy and tired after an excellent night safari and tucked into dinner!

Our final excursion the next morning saw us crossing the river in front of our resort (which was a bit nerve wracking as we had to carry our cameras from rock to rock across the fast flowing water, hoping that we wouldn't slip and fall into the river, writing off our cameras!)



However our guides carefully helped us across and soon we were in pristine forests, following elephant spoor under the canopy of the trees above us. It was cool and shady inside the forest and we could understand why the herds of elephants in Tabin use this area to relax when it is very hot. The first spoor we came across were apparently 24 to 48 hours old, but then our guide found a new set of spoor which he said belonged to a single male elephant that was just ahead of us. We quietly followed our guide through the jungle, until he stopped and called us together as a group as an aggressive male Pigtail Macaque was watching our progress. The Pigtails are physically very strong and he didn't want anyone being attacked! We continued on our way, spotting the Pigtail Macaque from time to time, as it kept a wary eye on us! Just when we thought we might come across the bull elephant, the spoor abruptly turned right through the forest, and headed down to the river. He had crossed over to the other side, just a short way in front of us. We were disappointed not to see the elephant, but just being in the forest had been a wonderful experience.

We gathered together for our last lunch at Tabin, sad that the Field Trip had gone so quickly. Our two vehicle convoy left Tabin around 2.30pm and we headed back down the rugged, dirt roads on our one and a half hour drive back to Lahad Datu Airport. Our flight left on time and soon we were landing back into Kota Kinabalu after a great weekend away with a lovely crowd of people.



Thank you Sabah Society for organising another great trip away!

Sandy Pike