BORNEO BIRDING TOUR: SABAH CLASSIC SET DEPARTURE TOUR

20–31 JULY 2027
20–31 JULY 2028
20–31 JULY 2029

Whitehead's Trogon *– one of the famous "Whitehead's trio" that we target on this Borneo tour.*

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Overview

Borneo, the world's third-largest island, is one of the world's most biodiverse wildlife havens. With over 50 island endemics found across pristine dipterocarp forests, montane cloudforests, riverine habitats, and mangrove swamps, you should enjoy an amazing time on this small-group birdwatching tour filled with stunning birds from mouthwatering families like pittas, trogons, kingfishers, hornbills, and broadbills, as well as a wide range of mammalian treasures.

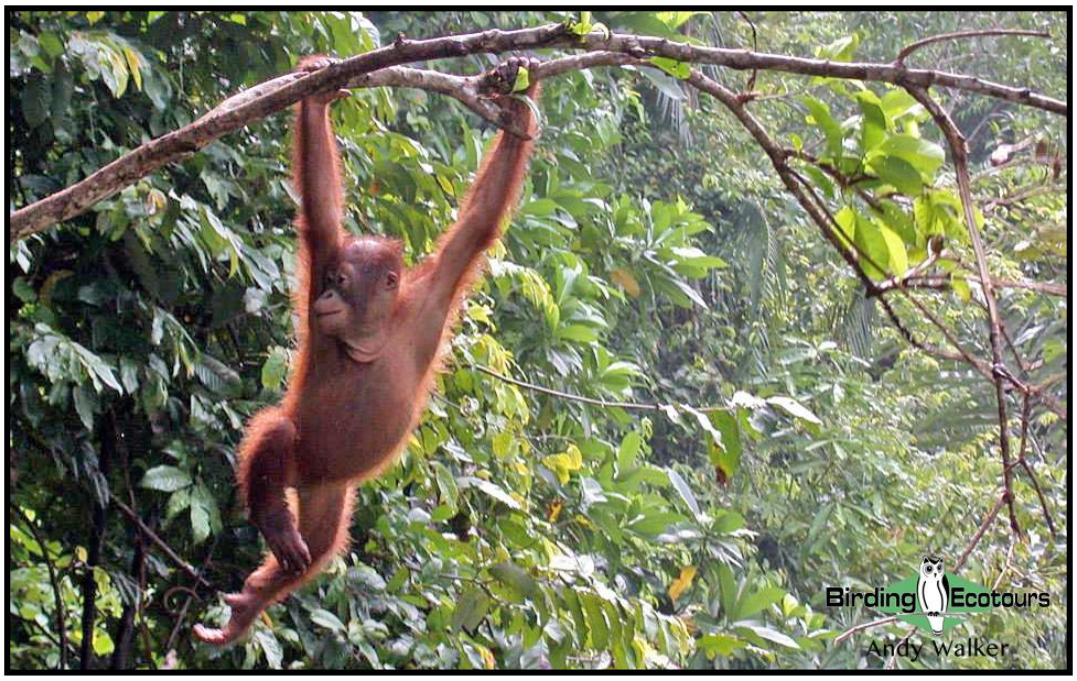
Our Borneo birding tour will take us to the important birdwatching sites of the Malaysian province of Sabah, which covers the northernmost part of this vast and amazing island, including time spent birding in five of its IBAs (Important Bird Areas identified by BirdLife International): the Crocker Range, Mount Kinabalu, Kabili-Sepilok, the Kinabatangan river floodplain, and the Danum Valley (where we will stay at the magnificent Borneo Rainforest Lodge).

Some of the many birds we target include the famous "Whitehead's trio" of **Whitehead's Trogon**, **Whitehead's Broadbill**, and **Whitehead's Spiderhunter**, along with the monotypic **Bornean Bristlehead**, a big target for family listers and one of Borneo's most sought endemics. We will also look for other mega endemic birds such as **Bornean Ground Cuckoo**, **Fruithunter**, and **Bornean Green Magpie**, and we will look for three glittering endemic pittas, the simply sublime trio of **Blue-headed Pitta**, **Black-crowned Pitta**, and **Bornean Banded Pitta**. Furthermore, we will also look for the near-mythical **Giant Pitta**. It is very unlikely that we will see the very tough endemic **Blue-banded Pitta** on this tour, though our **Malaysia: Borneo, Sarawak - Restricted Range Endemics** tour offers better chances for that one.

***Bornean Bristlehead**, a bizarre and monotypic endemic target (photo Norman Graf).*

On our radar will be all eight hornbill species that occur here, including the spectacular **Helmeted Hornbill**, which is now Critically Endangered (BirdLife International), along with stunning **Rhinoceros Hornbill**. There will also be plenty of other endemic and Sundaic birds available during this tour, such as **Storm's Stork**, **Banded Kingfisher**, and **Bornean Forktail**.

In addition to the incredible birds, we will also be focused on finding some spectacular mammals, such as the "old man of the forest", the **Bornean Orangutan**, along with the unique-looking **Proboscis Monkey**, plus other delights including **Malay Civet**, **Red Giant Flying Squirrel**, and **Northern** (North Bornean) **Grey Gibbon** as a small sample of possibilities.



*We will be sure to look for the amazing **Bornean Orangutan** during our tour of Sabah.*

Detailed Itinerary (12 days/11 nights)

Day 1. Arrival in Kota Kinabalu

Your flight arrives any time in the morning, and you will be transferred to your hotel with the rest of the morning at leisure. We will meet for a welcome lunch, and thereafter will make a start with our first birding of the tour. We will likely head to the nearby Tanjung Aru beach to look for **Blue-naped Parrot**, **Pied Triller**, and other birds that we may not encounter for the rest of the trip, as well as visiting a couple of excellent wetland sites. If you would like to arrive the night before the tour starts to acclimatize and get onto the local time zone, we can arrange this for you; please just let us know.

Overnight: Kota Kinabalu City Hotel (or similar)

Day 2. Tambunan Rafflesia Nature Reserve Center, transfer to Kinabalu National Park

In the early morning (usually around 04:30 a.m.), we will take a packed breakfast and transfer to Kinabalu National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. En route we will stop at the Tambunan Rafflesia Nature Reserve Center and Gunung Alab in the Crocker Range National Park. Here we will be birding for the whole morning, hoping to see, among others, a number of Bornean endemics such as **Whitehead's Spiderhunter**, **Bornean Barbet**, **Mountain Barbet**, **Golden-naped Barbet**, **Bornean Treepie**, **Chestnut-crested Yuhina**, **Penan Bulbul**, **Pale-faced Bulbul**, **Bornean Bulbul**, **Bare-headed Laughingthrush**, and **Chestnut-hooded Laughingthrush**. With luck, we might even find the tough **Crimson-headed Partridge** (Bloodhead) or **Red-breasted Partridge**.

After our birding, we will make our way into the mountains to Kinabalu National Park. We will be based for three nights in Kundasang, a small village very close to the entrance to the park.

Overnight: Kinabalu Pine Resort, Kundasang (or similar)

*Not too difficult to hear, though seeing **Crimson-headed Partridge** (Bloodhead) takes some luck!*

Day 3. Birding Kinabalu National Park

Today we will explore the network of forested trails around the headquarters of Kinabalu National Park on the forest-draped slopes of Mount (Gunung) Kinabalu. This mountain is the highest peak between the Himalayas and the tall ranges of New Guinea at 13,418 feet (4,090 meters). Its huge granite massif holds a spectacular avifauna with plenty of endemics for us to enjoy. Among these we hope to find **Whitehead's Trogon**, **Whitehead's Broadbill**, **Fruithunter**, **Golden-naped Barbet**, **Bornean Swiftlet**, **Bornean Treepie**, **Bornean Stubtail**, **Bornean Green Magpie**, **Bornean Forktail**, **Eyebrowed Jungle Flycatcher** (Bornean Shade-dweller), **Black-sided**

Flowerpecker, **Bare-headed Laughingthrush**, **Mountain Wren-Babbler**, **Bornean Whistler**, **Chestnut-crested Yuhina**, and **Everett's Thrush**.

*The large and bulky **Whitehead's Broadbill** will hopefully be found in the montane forests on Mount (Gunung) Kinabalu. Checking fruiting trees can provide rewards.*

In addition to the species mentioned above we will also be looking out for other enticing species, some perhaps even found in mixed feeding flocks (which can be a spectacular sight), like **Penan Bulbul**, **Cinereous Bulbul**, **Chestnut-hooded Laughingthrush**, **Sunda Laughingthrush**, **White-browed** (Blyth's) **Shrike-babbler**, **Mountain Leaf Warbler**, **Yellow-breasted Warbler**, **Aberrant** (Sunda) **Bush Warbler**, **White-throated Fantail**, **Temminck's Sunbird**, and **Black-and-crimson Oriole**, to name just a few.

Overnight: Kinabalu Pine Resort, Kundasang (or similar)

Day 4. Birding Kinabalu National Park

We will have another day birding within and around the Kinabalu National Park with morning and afternoon birding sessions likely to be punctuated by a period around our accommodation over the middle of the day. We will look for the birds mentioned above and will maybe focus on some of the more difficult species, or those requiring better views, possibly including the endemic **Bornean Forktail**, the endemic **Pale-faced Bulbul**, and recently split endemic **Bornean** (White-browed) **Shortwing**. We will also again be keeping our eyes peeled for **Mountain Blackeye**, **Pygmy Heleia**, **Fruithunter**, **Cinereous Bulbul**, **Bornean Treepie**, **Bornean Stubtail**, **Bornean Whistler**, **Chestnut-hooded Laughingthrush**, **Whitehead's Trogon**, **Whitehead's Broadbill**, and **Mountain Wren-Babbler**. During the day we might also find **Least Pygmy Squirrel** (the

smallest squirrel in the world), the attractive **Tufted** (Whitehead's) **Pygmy Squirrel**, and the rather huge **Pale Giant Squirrel**.

Overnight: Kinabalu Pine Resort, Kundasang (or similar)

*The striking **Bornean Green Magpie** can be seen in Kinabalu National Park.*

Day 5. Poring Hot Springs, transfer to Sepilok

Although in the afternoon today we will have a lengthy (but extremely worthwhile) drive, we will spend a good part of the morning birding at Poring Hot Springs, a small reserve approximately 25 miles (40 kilometers) from Kinabalu National Park.

Poring is mainly known for its hot springs, which are a major Bornean tourist attraction, but the reserve also holds numerous exciting birds. During our walk we hope to encounter **Rufous-collared Kingfisher**, **Black-and-yellow Broadbill**, **Banded Broadbill**, **Chestnut-capped Thrush**, **Moustached Babbler**, **Bornean Black-capped Babbler**, **Diard's Trogon**, **Black Hornbill**, **Red-throated Barbet**, **Little Spiderhunter**, **Bornean Blue Flycatcher**, **Maroon-breasted Philentoma**, **Fulvous-chested Jungle Flycatcher**, and perhaps also the attractive **Scaly-breasted Bulbul**. If we are lucky enough to find a fruiting tree, there is a slim chance of the tough **Hose's Broadbill**, but chances for this species are greater on our Sarawak tour.

During the afternoon we will drive approximately five to six hours overland, mainly through endless oil palm plantations, to Sepilok and check into our accommodation for the next couple of nights. It is a depressing sight in all honesty; however, we are encouraged that there are still some large areas of protected habitat allowing the incredible lowland species here to continue to exist, and we hope that the presence of birdwatchers in the country can spark an interest in the local population to continue with the conservation efforts underway. We might see **Crested Serpent**

Eagle, **Changeable Hawk-Eagle**, **Black-winged Kite**, **Long-tailed Shrike**, **Striated Grassbird**, and **Dusky Munia** along the way.

Overnight: Sepilok Jungle Resort (or similar)

Day 6. Kabili-Sepilok Forest Reserve and Rainforest Discovery Center

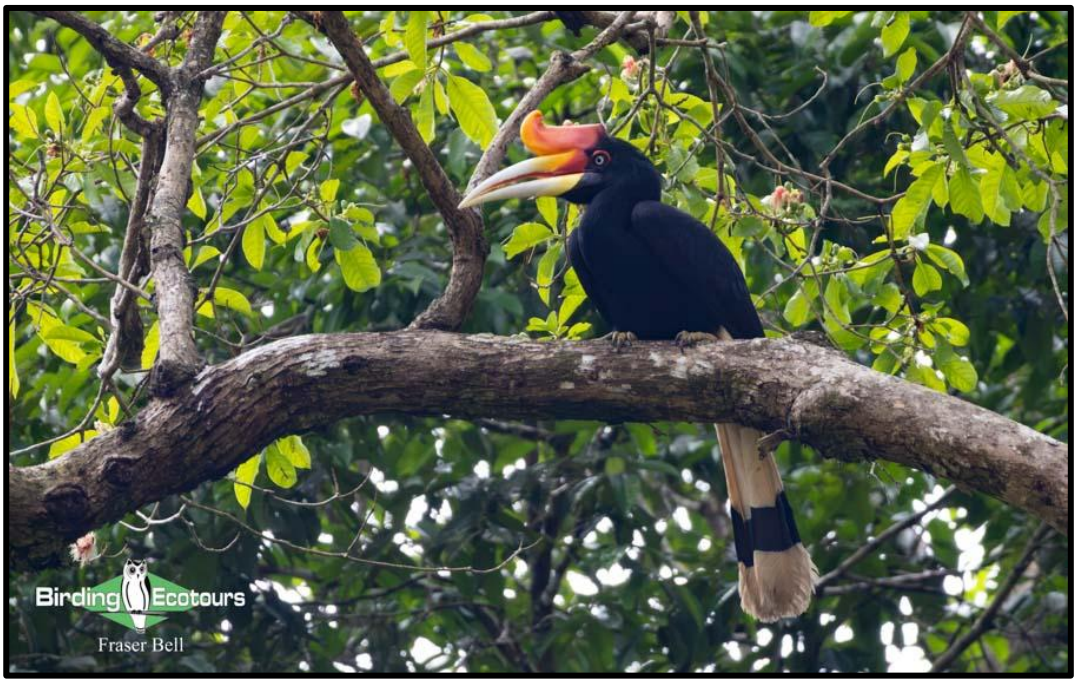
We will have a full day to explore this exciting area. We will bird the wonderful dipterocarp forest of the Kabili-Sepilok Forest Reserve with its magnificent walkway at the Rainforest Discovery Center in the morning, when the birds are most active. This will give us a chance for **Bornean Bristlehead**, our main target, among many other species we are going to encounter here like **Black-crowned Pitta**, **Red-naped Trogon**, **Scarlet-rumped Trogon**, **Bornean Black-capped Babbler**, **Red-bearded Bee-eater**, **Oriental Dwarf Kingfisher**, **Rufous-collared Kingfisher**, **Banded Kingfisher**, **Bornean Spiderhunter**, and possibly even **Little Spiderhunter**, **Thick-billed Spiderhunter**, **Spectacled Spiderhunter**, **Yellow-eared Spiderhunter**, and **Long-billed Spiderhunter**. We can also find the endemic **Yellow-rumped Flowerpecker**, and **Dusky Munia**, as well as barbets, mid-canopy bulbuls, ground-dwelling babblers, cuckoos, minivets, and many more avian riches, such as **Rhinoceros Hornbill**, **White-crowned Hornbill**, and **Wallace's Hawk-Eagle**, that can be found in these wonderfully birdy forests. This is a very special place, and it is sure to be a memorable morning.

*The stunning **Black-crowned Pitta** is possible in the Kabili-Sepilok Forest Reserve area, and a sighting like this would be a tour highlight for sure.*

While birding here we might also see a number of inquisitive squirrels and possibly some primate species, among which the endearing **Red Langur** might be particularly appreciated.

An optional visit to the famous Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Center for either the morning or the afternoon feeding of these semi-wild primates, along with several other species that take advantage of the free handouts, can be arranged, although it is very likely, but of course not guaranteed, that we will see **Bornean Orangutan** in the wild during the second half of this tour.

Overnight: Sepilok Jungle Resort (or similar)



Rhinoceros Hornbill *is an incredible sight.*

Day 7. Birding Sepilok, transfer to the Kinabatangan River via Gomantong Caves

After breakfast we will still have time to do some morning birding in Sepilok for any species we might have missed or of which we would like to try to get improved views. We will then drive two hours overland, transferring to Sukau on the Kinabatangan River. We will make a stop at the famous Gomantong Caves, an intricate cave system inside Gomantong Hill, the largest limestone outcrop in the Lower Kinabatangan area. The caves and the surrounding area are a protected area for wildlife, especially **Bornean Orangutan**, which is frequently seen at the entrance to the caves, and are well-known in birding circles for the variety of swiftlets inhabiting them, together with a vast array of other wildlife, including massive populations of cockroaches and bats. Here we have a chance to see four species of swiftlets, three of which are near-identical and really only safely told apart by their nests. **Edible-nest Swiftlet**, **Black-nest Swiftlet**, **Mossy-nest Swiftlet**, and the more distinct **Plume-toed Swiftlet** all nest in these caves. There is a boardwalk through the caves that will give us access to the inside of the cave system, where we will be able to see where these birds make their nests and how the local workers collect them for bird's-nest soup on intricate rope-and-ladder systems.

After arrival and check-in at the lovely Borneo Nature Lodge on the Kinabatangan River, where we will stay for two nights, we will embark in the late afternoon on our first birding river cruise.

The Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary is now within the purview of the Sabah Wildlife Department. Despite ever-encroaching oil palm plantations, the original lowland forests and mangrove swamps near the coast have largely survived, providing sanctuary for a population of **Saltwater Crocodiles** and containing some of Borneo's highest concentrations of wildlife. Of special note are Borneo's indigenous **Proboscis Monkey**, **Bornean Orangutan**, and **Asian Elephant** (the subspecies occurring here possibly a full species: Bornean Pygmy Elephant). We will be looking for as many of these unique animals during our time on the river, and this sanctuary is also well known for its prolific birdlife.

Some of our main avian targets on the Kinabatangan River include **Bornean Black Magpie**, **Collared Kingfisher**, **Rufous-collared Kingfisher**, **Ruddy Kingfisher**, **Stork-billed Kingfisher**, **Banded Kingfisher**, **Blue-eared Kingfisher**, and **Malaysian Blue-banded Kingfisher**, along with **Red-naped Trogon**, **Scarlet-rumped Trogon**, and **Western Hooded Pitta**. If we are very lucky, we will also find a huge target bird, the enigmatic, rare, and just plain tough endemic **Bornean Ground Cuckoo**.

Overnight: Borneo Nature Lodge, Sukau (or similar)

*We will hope for good, perched views of **Storm's Stork**.*

Day 8. Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary

In the early morning and mid-afternoon, boat trips will take us along the river and its small tributaries. Here we hope to see wild **Bornean Orangutan** feasting on the fruits of riverside fig trees or, in the late afternoon, preparing their nighttime nests. Troops of the bizarre **Proboscis Monkeys** with their huge potbellies and the males' extraordinary, floppy noses will watch us curiously. Many groups of **Long-tailed Macaques** will be our constant companions, and we might find the occasional **Silvery Lutung** and, with luck, perhaps **Northern** (North Bornean) **Grey**

Gibbon. We might come across a herd of **Asian Elephants** (Bornean Pygmy Elephant) in this area, or the secretive and rare **Flat-headed Cat**.

The forest along the river and its tributaries is home to a wealth of birds, including such spectacular species as **Rhinoceros Hornbill**, **Helmeted Hornbill**, **Black Hornbill**, **Oriental Pied Hornbill**, **Bushy-crested Hornbill**, **Wreathed Hornbill**, **White-crowned Hornbill**, and **Wrinkled Hornbill** (that is all the hornbills that occur in Borneo!), **White-bellied Sea Eagle**, **Lesser Fish Eagle**, **Grey-headed Fish Eagle**, **Wallace's Hawk-Eagle**, **Lesser Adjutant**, **Black-and-red Broadbill**, **Black-and-yellow Broadbill**, **Western Hooded Pitta**, and with luck a pair or two of the Endangered (IUCN) **Storm's Storks** or the endemic **White-fronted Falconet** sitting on a snag.

Overnight: Borneo Nature Lodge, Sukau (or similar)

*The huge **Helmeted Hornbill** is a spectacular and now rare sight across its whole small global range due to illegal hunting.*

Day 9. Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary to Danum Valley via Lahad Datu

After a final early morning cruise to look for more birds, we will depart overland to Danum Valley and make a stop at Lahad Datu for lunch after a journey of a couple of hours. After lunch we will have another drive for a few more hours on an adventurous prior logging road to the Danum Valley Conservation Area and the Borneo Rainforest Lodge. This wonderful, upscale lodge is situated in a large tract of mind-blowing primary rainforest, one of only very few remaining on Borneo after rampant logging and clearing for oil palm plantations. While within much of the conservation area selective logging was allowed, a large part had been set aside for the protection of one of only two remaining expanses of primary lowland dipterocarp forest in Sabah.

The Danum Valley Conservation Area boasts 268 bird species, and 110 mammals, 72 reptiles, 56 amphibians, and 37 fish species. We will search for a good selection of especially the birds and mammals during our time in this great habitat. We plan to arrive at the lodge by the middle of the afternoon and begin birding before it gets dark, making a start on the species listed below for Days 10 and 11.

After dinner we may be able to join one of the night drives to look for nocturnal animals as well as night birds, and we will likely make a couple of night outings during our time in the Danum Valley. Results of these are always unpredictable, of course, but with luck we might find **Large Frogmouth** and **Gould's Frogmouth** or something really exciting from the mammalian world, like **Red Giant** or **Black Flying Squirrels**, **Sunda Flying Lemur** (Colugo), the occasional **Philippine Slow Loris**, **Horsfield's Tarsier**, or the tiny **Temminck's Flying Squirrel**.

Overnight: Borneo Rainforest Lodge, Danum Valley (or similar)

The attractive and endemic (to Sabah) ***White-crowned Shama*** *can be found around our accommodation in the Danum Valley.*

Days 10–11. Danum Valley Conservation Area

During our two full days in Danum Valley we will explore the excellent system of trails around the lodge as well as the canopy walkway, and after dinner there will be opportunities to go out with one of the local guides in search of nocturnal wildlife.

Among the multitude of birds we hope to encounter here are eight species of hornbills, with the huge **Rhinoceros Hornbill** likely to be seen and heard almost daily, plus chances of **Helmeted Hornbill** and **White-crowned Hornbill** to name a couple of others.

The entire slate of Bornean endemic pittas occurs in Danum Valley, though on this tour we are only likely to have a chance for three of these endemics, **Black-crowned Pitta**, **Blue-headed Pitta**, and **Bornean Banded Pitta**, and **Giant Pitta** and **Western Hooded Pitta** also occur in the areas we will be exploring.

In addition to the suite of hornbills and pittas mentioned above we will look for the monotypic **Bornean Bristlehead** and of course other special target birds like **Bornean Crested Fireback**, **Sabah** (Chestnut-necklaced) **Partridge**, **Bornean Blue Flycatcher**, **Sunda Blue Flycatcher**, **White-crowned Shama**, **Black-throated Wren-Babbler**, **Bornean Wren-Babbler**, **Crested Jayshrike**, **Chestnut-naped Forktail**, **White-crowned Forktail**, **Great-billed Heron**, **Wallace's Hawk-Eagle**, **Blyth's Hawk-Eagle**, **Rufous-bellied Eagle**, **Bat Hawk**, **Large Green Pigeon**, **Great Slaty Woodpecker**, **Olive-backed Woodpecker**, **Ashy Tailorbird**, **Whiskered Treeswift**, **Oriental Dwarf Kingfisher**, **Chestnut-capped Thrush**, and a host of forest bulbuls (including the Critically Endangered (BirdLife International) **Straw-headed Bulbul**), babblers, flowerpeckers, flycatchers, woodpeckers, drongos, raptors, sunbirds, and spiderhunters. This place really is a naturalist's dream.

Blue-headed Pitta *is a target during our time in Danum Valley (photo L. W. Keong).*

Danum Valley is a particularly good area for **Bornean Orangutan**, which is sometimes even seen within the lodge grounds! Commoner mammal species include **Long-tailed Macaque** and **Southern Pig-tailed Macaque**, a wide variety of both diurnal and nocturnal tree shrews and squirrels, **Bearded Pig**, **Masked Palm** and **Malay Civets**, both **Greater** and **Lesser Oriental Chevrotains**, the endemic **Bornean Yellow Muntjac**, the much-more-widespread **Southern Red Muntjac**, and **Sambar**. The biggest predator here is the **Sunda Clouded Leopard**, which is seen on night drives a couple of times a year – so one can always hope (but certainly not expect!).

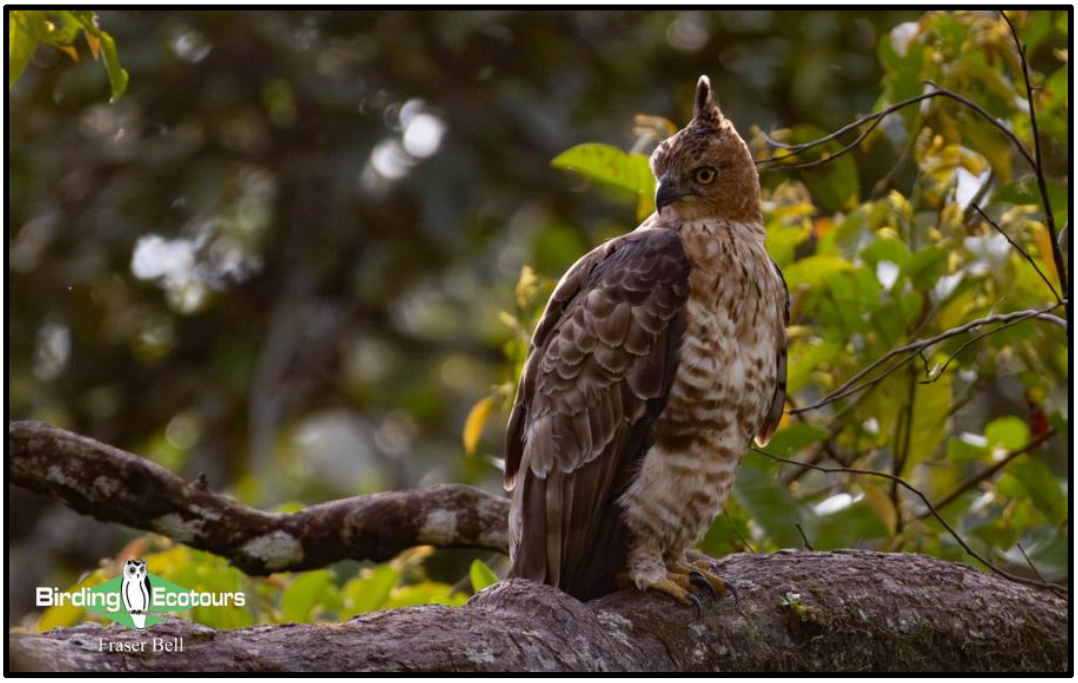
The heat of the afternoon after lunch allows some relaxed meanderings around the resort, and you can find flowerpeckers and spiderhunters in the flowering bushes, along with some stunning butterflies, all of which might provide some nice photographic opportunities. Regardless of what we see here we will be in for a veritable treat. It is a real privilege to wander through the forest and imagine what this fascinating island would have been like in years gone by. We could well encounter a trip highlight bird or mammal during our time in Danum Valley.

Overnight: Borneo Rainforest Lodge, Danum Valley (or similar)

Day 12. Danum Valley to Lahad Datu, departure

Sadly, our exciting tour to wild Sabah will end today. After a final morning relaxed birding session and early lunch, we will transfer from Danum Valley back to the Lahad Datu airport, where the tour ends in the early afternoon when we arrive back at Lahad Datu airport.

Overnight: Not included



Wallace's Hawk-Eagle *can often be found in the Danum Valley.*

Please note that the itinerary cannot be guaranteed as it is only a rough guide and can be changed (usually slightly) due to factors such as availability of accommodation, updated information on the state of accommodation, roads, or birding sites, the discretion of the guides, and other factors. In addition, we sometimes have to use a different guide from the one advertised due to tour scheduling or other factors.

Tour Details

Duration:	12 days
Group size:	5–8
Dates:	20–31 July 2027 20–31 July 2028 20–31 July 2029
Start:	Kota Kinabalu
End:	Lahad Datu
Prices:	MYR 41,300 per person sharing – based on 5–8 participants, 15 % surcharge if only 4 (2027) MYR 45,800 per person sharing – based on 5–8 participants, 15 % surcharge if only 4 (2028) MYR 50,885 per person sharing – based on 5–8 participants, 15 % surcharge if only 4 (2029)
Single supplements:	MYR 8,160 (2027) MYR 9,060 (2028) MYR 10,055 (2029)

Price includes:

Accommodation (as described above)
All meals (from lunch on Day 1 to breakfast on Day 12)
Drinking water, please bring a refillable water bottle
Expert tour leader
Local bird and wildlife guide fees
All ground transport and tolls while on tour, including airport pick-up and drop-off
National park/birdwatching reserve entrance fees (except the optional visit to the Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Center on Day 6)
Gratuities (at restaurants only, any other gratuity not included)
Excursions and activities as detailed in the itinerary

Price excludes:

Flights (into Kota Kinabalu at the beginning of the tour, out of Lahad Datu at the end of the tour, note we can book the flight for you from Lahad Datu back to Kota Kinabalu)
Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Center (optional visit on Day 6)
Airport taxes (usually covered by your flight tickets)
Visa if required
Soft/alcoholic drinks
Gratuities, except at restaurants, where they are included (please see our tipping guidelines blog)
Camera and video fees if required

Personal travel insurance
Items of a personal nature, e.g. gifts, laundry, internet access, phone calls, etc.