



Despite its excessively long tail, the male Asian Paradise Flycatcher is surprisingly fast-flying and agile in pursuit of its insect prey.



# BIRDING IN A FOREST SANCTUARY

IAN WOOD CELEBRATES A PROJECT IN BORNEO  
THAT NOT ONLY PROTECTS ORANGUTANS, BUT  
SCORES OF BIRD SPECIES TOO.

**Little Spiderhunter,** like its sunbird relatives, will feed on nectar as well as insects. It is the commonest spiderhunter in Borneo and can be found widely at lower altitudes.

**M**Y FASCINATION with orangutans began when I stumbled across a group while exploring a remote area of rainforest in Sumatra in 1996. After this I became very aware of the dangers they face and wanted to do something to help.

This led me to Tanjung Puting National Park in Borneo three years ago to explore the possibilities of a fund-raising venture to support the work of the Orangutan Foundation. Now I return twice a year, taking a group of six people on a tour of the park, with the profits helping the Foundation to protect this area.

The destruction of Indonesian rainforests over the last 30 years has been well documented and can give an impression that there is little hope for the future, so I'm delighted to be able to report a conservation success story here.

The reserve, which sits on a peninsula that juts out into the Java Sea, is low lying and swampy with a spine of dry ground which rises a few feet above the omnipresent swamp. It covers 416,000 hectares, which is roughly the size of Cornwall.

#### LOGGING CLAMPDOWN

Happily, there is no illegal logging now taking place. The Indonesian government has been good at enforcing forest laws over the last few years and this region is considered one of the major hopes for the long-term future of wild orangutans.

As well as more than 4,000 orangutans, this bio-diversity hotspot is home to 30 other mammal species, 17 different reptiles and more than 260 types of bird, including large populations of hornbills (Rhinoceros, Pied and Black Hornbills are the most commonly seen), plus rookeries containing thousands of breeding wetland birds, including Indian Darters, Black-crowned Night Herons and Lesser Adjutant Storks.

The reserve has the only known populations of Wood Ducks in Kalimantan, as well as major populations of pheasants, including the Argus, Black, Crested and Crestless Fireback Pheasants, so a visit offers great





In Wood

**Inset left: Proboscis monkeys are endemic to Borneo – and with a population as low as 3,000, it is vital their forest habitats are protected.**

**Left: One of the most colourful members of its family, the Orange-bellied Flowerpecker has a tubular tongue for extracting plant nectar.**

**The orangutans at Tanjung Putting live wild but are happy to visit feeding stations for bananas when natural food is in short supply.**

opportunities to see a variety of birdlife along with the more famous inhabitants of the park.

There are no roads within the national park, so all access is by river. Every time I visit Tanjung Putting the journey into the park is particularly special. My most recent trip was in September 2008 and it was late afternoon by the time we set off from the small port of Kumai.

Clouds of swifts can always be seen here along with a number of sea birds. As we chugged across the small channel to the park we saw a White-bellied Sea Eagle dive down close to our boat and pluck a fish from the water.

After 20 minutes we turned onto the first river that marks the southern boundary of Tanjung Putting and the sounds of civilization soon dissolved, leaving just the dull drone of our small engine. It is mainly mangrove swamps for the first 2km of the journey and these are often good places to see Orange-bellied Flowerpeckers flying about with their incredibly fast wing beat. They are tiny (only about 8cm) but the distinctive flash of their orange bellies makes them easy to spot.

On this stretch of the river we were accompanied by several Brahmini Kites and

also saw a Crested Serpent Eagle quietly sitting high in a tree. Half an hour or so later the mangroves give way to forest and we started to see kingfishers flashing across the river in front of our boat. There are eight species of kingfisher in Tanjung Putting, including the Blue-eared, Black-backed and Stork-billed.

Towards dusk, proboscis monkeys gather in the treetops at the sides of the river. They are instantly recognizable by their potbellies and bizarre noses; features that earned them the rather unfortunate nickname 'Dutchmen'. The males have an extraordinary long bulbous nose and the females smaller pointed ones. This time of day is great for seeing them silhouetted against the setting sun.

The only place to stay in the park is the comfortable Rimba Lodge (see Fact File) which takes about 90 minutes to reach by boat. Rimba Lodge will organise boat journeys and treks in the park and they have also built a wooden tower high up in the trees for birdwatchers.

From here I saw several birds including a Cream-vented Bulbul, which generally keeps to the middle or tops of the trees and can be distinguished by its soft chattering chirrup call that it repeats almost hysterically.

### APE ATTRACTION

At feeding platforms in the park orangutans are offered supplementary food to help them at times when fruit in the forest is scarce and a journey up-river to any of these sites is a joy for lovers of wildlife. The occasional crocodile, a glimpse of a hornbill and even the sighting of a wild orangutan, can all happen within a few minutes of each other.

The nearest feeding site to Rimba Lodge is called Tanjung Harapan and is about a 20-minute walk along a well-defined path from the boat jetty. This part of the national park is secondary forest and offers good opportunities to see birds – on my last trip I saw a Purple-throated Sunbird with its unmistakable brilliant metallic plumage.

Secondary forests are also good places to see Spiderhunters, active birds constantly on the look-out for food. Many tropical flowers are designed to attract them. They use their

Spider webs are used by Pied Fantails to hold together their delicate nests. This highly active flycatcher regularly fans out its long tail and it is believed its white flashes help to flush insects.



long beaks to sip nectar from banana and ginger flowers and are often seen flying fast across the jungle trails.

There is of course no guarantee that the orangutans will appear, but their absence is actually a good sign as it means there is plenty of food in the forest. However, more often than not, the attraction of free bananas is irresistible and visitors can expect very close views of these majestic apes.

In the wild they are solitary animals and spend most of their time high up in the treetops but the semi-wild residents of Tanjung Puting are happy in the company of their human visitors.

When I'm asked why I think it is so important to ensure a future for orangutans, I point out the fact that they are one of humankind's closest relatives in the animal kingdom, sharing 94.6% the same DNA as us.

This perhaps gives us a moral obligation to ensure their survival, but more importantly, they are a keystone species and a symbol for the threatened rainforests where they live. If the orangutan can be protected, then by default, millions of insects, hundreds of thousands of trees and many birds and mammal species will also be saved.

Ultimately these forests are vital for humans too, obviously for the people that live in or near them and in a wider context they serve the purpose of locking up carbon that would otherwise contribute to global warming. In

fact if the CO2 emissions from de-forestation are taken into account, Indonesia becomes the third highest contributor after the USA and China.

An essential part of any visit must include the famous Camp Leakey research centre. A Canadian researcher, Birute Galdikas, first came to Kalimantan in 1971 intent on increasing our understanding of human ancestry. For months she lived in a damp hut with hardly a glimpse of an orangutan but she gradually began to find and study these great apes.

Her perseverance was rewarded and over the next 20 years she amassed hundreds of



Taking it easy – this orangutan and its youngster mimic the relaxing poses of human visitors to the reserve.

hours of observation that revealed many previously unknown facts. The camp has grown from its humble beginnings, with more than a dozen field staff now living there, while a number of rehabilitated orangutans come and go as they please.

The journey to Camp Leakey takes about 90 minutes by boat from Rimba lodge and is a wonderful experience. Head there early morning and return late afternoon and you have the best opportunity of seeing birdlife on route.

Asian Paradise Flycatchers are quite common in the lowland forests here and can often be seen hunting from a perch in the lower half of the canopy. The male has an elongated pair of tail feathers that extends up to 25cm beyond the rest of the tail.

Hornbills are some of the park's most distinctive inhabitants and we saw many groups flying overhead on both trips up river. The most common species in Tanjung Puting is the Oriental Pied Hornbill but I also see the beautiful Rhinoceros variety from time to time.

It's worth keeping a constant lookout whenever you are traveling by boat in Tanjung Puting. Towards the end of my very last journey in September I came across a Storm's Stork sitting in the top of a tree right next to the river.

These large birds are now highly endangered and it is thought that there are less than 300 breeding pairs remaining in the world. Such a sighting reinforces the value of protecting places such as Tanjung Puting.

## TANJUNG FACT FILE

### Getting there

Head for the town of Pangkajene in southern Borneo. There is now a direct flight from Jakarta to Pangkajene on Garuda Airways. At the time of writing it is not possible to book these flights from outside Indonesia but seats can usually be found once in Jakarta.

### Paperwork

The police permit to visit Tanjung Puting can be obtained on arrival in Pangkajene. You will need two photocopies of your passport to obtain these permits.

### Getting around

Rimba Lodge can arrange to meet you at the airport, sort out your permits and transfer you by car and then boat into the park. They will also arrange boat trips around the

park with a knowledgeable guide. ([www.rimbalodge.com](http://www.rimbalodge.com))

### Best time to visit

The dry season in Tanjung Puting is between April and October, making this the best time to travel there. Many insect-eaters breed in April when the water levels are at their highest and insects are numerous. Fruit-eating bird species tend to breed a little later.

### Useful guides

The Fieldguide to the birds of Borneo, Sumatra, Java and Bali by John Mackinnon and Karen Phillips.

### Health advice

Travellers should have up-to-date recommended vaccinations. Kalimantan does have some risk of malaria but there have not been any

cases in Tanjung Puting for some time. Visitors should discuss the current advice on malaria in this area with their doctor.

### Organised trips

Ian Wood runs two trips each year to Tanjung Puting with places limited to just six people on each tour. Please visit [www.ageofplace.co.uk](http://www.ageofplace.co.uk) for details of these tours or contact him on 00 44 (0) 7692 800 234. A number of other British-based tour companies also offer tours to see orangutans.

### Conservation

For more information on conservation projects in Tanjung Puting visit [www.orangutan.org.uk](http://www.orangutan.org.uk)