

# MALAYAN NATURE JOURNAL

## **BORNEO : an Introduction**

At almost 750,000 km<sup>2</sup>, Borneo ranks as the world's third largest island. The political division between three nations—Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam and Indonesia—and their contrasting histories, have generated economic and cultural distinctions in human society in different parts of this huge island. Nonetheless, geography, climate, and plant and animal ecology provide a unifying environment to justify the theme of this issue of the Malayan Nature Journal. In these pages, participants from all three nations have presented a remarkable collection of reports on aspects of the natural history of Borneo, or parts of Borneo. Collectively, these papers illustrate the diverse character and fascinating breadth of the subject, and celebrate the endeavours of the community of people and institutions who participate in studies that add to our collective understanding of the diverse and remarkable natural history of Borneo.

The opening contribution draws attention to the Proboscis monkey, the long-nosed colobine endemic to Borneo, frequenting coastal and riparian forest throughout the island. Equally well-known is Borneo's great ape, the Orangutan, whose threatened status has roused international and national support for the rescue and rehabilitation programme at Lamadau, Central Kalimantan. Also generated in Indonesia, in West Kalimantan, the Mastwatch website continues to link observers throughout Borneo in a programme to monitor the phenomenon of mast-flowering and fruiting of dipterocarps, the magnificent giant trees that dominate the lowland and lower montane forest of Borneo. There follows a study of the utilisation of natural resources by an indigenous community of Muslim faith.

Move on to the giant mammals, Asian elephants, at last proven by skilled zooarchaeological detective work to be present in Borneo in the Late Pleistocene era. An archaic group among invertebrates, the Odonata (dragonflies and damselflies) are well represented in Borneo; presented here is an overall review and a linked, first Borneo-wide checklist. The birds of Borneo are perhaps a group more often drawing naturalists to Borneo; several checklists exist and it is more cogent to include, in these pages, an authoritative review of ornithology, an active pursuit throughout the island.

There are two contributions from Brunei based on phototrap images. The first provides previously unknown evidence of colour variation among the Sundaic Horse-tailed squirrel, while the second puts into circulation the first pictures of living Borneo Yellow muntjac, and original evidence of ecological separation of the two species of barking deer in Borneo. On the island Mantanani Besar a study, initiated by the Sabah Society, has investigated the human/bird relationship, and assessed the likelihood of a productive future for the strange, mound-building megapodes. A short essay on the cultural significance of Clouded leopard precedes a careful, well illustrated account of the living legend of Tigers in East and North Kalimantan. In the same area, human ingenuity has invented a mechanical alternative to the blowpipe, the traditional hunting weapon of interior people of Borneo. The second-last features a study of the declining mud crabs in Kuching mangroves, and this issue closes on a report showcasing prey-handling of a venomous Bornean Keeled Pit Viper.

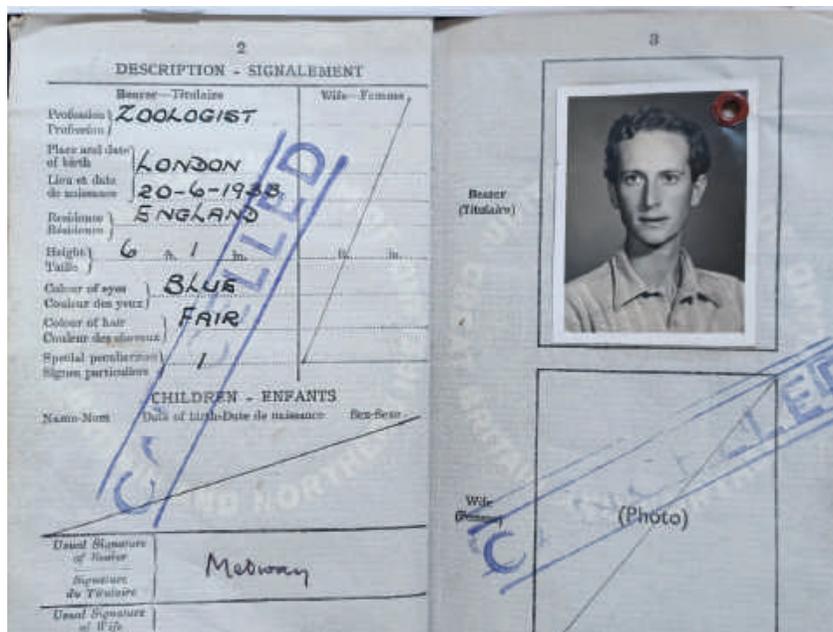
## **Apologia: lifetime connections with people and places in Borneo**

Readers of the Malayan Nature Journal may question my qualification to serve as Guest Editor of this Borneo-themed issue. I hope a few paragraphs can provide satisfactory justification.

Sometimes, in Sarawak, people who half-hear my name, jump to the (wrong) conclusion that I am related to the dynasty of Brooke Rajahs. Dismiss that as the reason why, in March 1956, shortly before graduating at Cambridge, I did not refuse the offer by Tom Harrison, then Curator of the Sarawak Museum, who offered to give me a job, if I came to Kuching. So, in June 1956, I bought a passage on a cargo steamer of the Blue Funnel Line, from Liverpool to Singapore, where I transhipped to S.S. Rajah Brooke -- and finally arrived at Kuching.

The 'job' was termed 'Technical Assistant to the Curator', and had no fixed duties. The Museum was engaged in a programme of amassing bird skins, funded by the eminent businessman and ornithologist Dato Loke Wan Tho. Young men from rural longhouses were given basic training in skinning and specimen preparation, and sent home with a supply of cartridges, museum labels, cotton wool and preservative. At the Museum, I sorted and identified the resulting skins. This task -- a valuable introduction to the avifauna -- was supplemented by proof-reading B. E. Smythies' new checklist of the birds of Borneo (1957). The text went back and forth (seven times, I remember) between Museum and the Government printer, whose staff were seriously challenged by Latin nomenclature and the arcane rules on the use of italics in zoology. In the same year, I was issued a Sarawak international passport, no. 4553, valid in 'The British Commonwealth and all Foreign Countries'. On this document, I travelled the world for ten years until it expired in February 1967.

Plate 1 - Sarawak International Passport



In 1958, promoted to Archaeological Assistant, I became responsible for the identification of animal remains excavated at Niah caves, and elsewhere in Sarawak and Sabah. As a personal project, the Curator also encouraged me to study the edible-nest swiftlets -- a group of birds with unique adaptations to life in caves. Two years later, my fieldwork on swiftlets became the foundation of a PhD dissertation at the University of Birmingham, U.K. In 1960-1961, a post-doc fellowship with Yayasan Siswa Lokantara (as ahli burung walet) extended my research to Indonesia; Here I found other managed populations of cave swiftlets, and met other scientists prepared to share their experience in the taxonomy and behaviour of these fascinating birds.

In 1961, appointed to the Zoology Department at the University of Malaya, I was well placed to resume research on the animal remains excavated in Malaysian caves, notably at Niah, Sarawak. Discoveries included the foot bones of Malayan tapir, a large mammal now extinct in Borneo, but I failed to find evidence of the past presence of elephant in any Late Pleistocene context.

Most identifiable animal remains in these cave sites consisted of teeth and bones of mammals, encouraging me to study extant Borneo species. In 1965, a grant from U.S. sources funded a round-the-world air ticket. Starting at the B.P. Bishop Museum, Honolulu, and progressing across mainland USA from San Francisco, via Chicago and Washington, D.C., to the Peabody Museum, Yale, and then to museums in London, Paris and Frankfurt, and finally at the India Museum, Calcutta, I managed to see all historic mammal collections from Borneo. During this circumglobal tour, I discovered two undescribed species of small mammal—not in the upland localities they inhabit, but in the museum cabinets where they lay, overlooked: the Grey-bellied pencil-tailed tree-mouse, in the U.S. National Museum, Washington, D.C., USA, and the Black shrew, in the Museum of Comparative Zoology, Cambridge, Mass., USA. The resulting annotated checklist of mammals of Borneo was published by the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, first in 1965 and, later, as a revised edition, in 1977.

In the 1990s, invited by the Director of Forests and Wildlife, Sarawak, to review the edible birds'-nest industry. I looked for a student-assistant to cooperate in the research. Luckily, Lim Chan Koon, a graduate student at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas) was willing to transfer to the topic, he was awarded a Government scholarship to the University of Kent, U.K., and I became external supervisor for his Ph.D. I remembered my 1957 visit to Salai Cave, in the Middle Baram above Long Laput, site of an accessible colony of White-nest swiftlets. We approached YB Kebing Wan, head of the family of hereditary owners of the cave rights, and were pleased by his generous offer to provide facilities for a year's research on site, alongside his relative Usong Wan, as cave manager. This unprecedented opportunity for a dedicated and assiduous student, and for shared learning by myself as supervisor, resulted in a successful graduation by Dr Lim.

In 2001, a grant from Flora and Fauna International helped Dr Lim and myself, with friends from the community of Sarawak birds'-nest cave owners, including George Nawan, to undertake an investigation of birds'-nest operators and island sites in North Kalimantan, and the extensive complex of caves occupied by Black-nest swiftlets in the upper Kayan river, East Kalimantan, managed by a local cooperative. In 2002, our experiences were recounted in a jointly authored book: *Swiftlets of Borneo: builders of edible nests*, produced in a lavishly illustrated edition by Natural History Publications (Borneo) and reissued with revisions in 2014.

In 2009, I was appointed a member of Yayasan Ulin, an Indonesian foundation dedicated to conservation of natural habitat and wildlife in areas unprotected by legislation. I traversed the southern breadth of Borneo by mixed transport modes from Pontianak to Pangkalan Bun, West Kalimantan, across Central Kalimantan, to Banjarmasin and Martapura, South Kalimantan, and later, from Balikpapan to Samarinda and Tenggarong, East Kalimantan, and—later still— from Bandarbaru on the great Mahakam river, by speed boat up the tributary, Sg Belayan, to the oil palm plantations operated by REA Kaltim. The director and staff of REAKon, the conservation arm of this British-owned company, provided valuable insights of the potential for good environmental management on a large commercial plantation.

In 2014, I was invited to participate in the Heart of Borneo initiative, as operated in Brunei Darussalam under Royal patronage and ministerial support. Recipient of a

Merdeka Award in the same year, among other projects, I was able to fund a Sabah graduate of the University of Malaya, for his M Sc research into the Philippine megapodes of the Mantanani archipelago, Kota Belud District, Sabah. In the following years, until the Covid-19 Pandemic closed international travel, I have made at least one visit to a destination in Borneo, and thereby renewed or extended my personal contacts among colleagues who share enthusiasm for all aspects of natural history.

Through the Pandemic years 2020 and 2021, and into 2022, contact has been limited to digital exchanges. As Guest Editor of this Borneo-themed issue of the Malayan Nature Journal, I am supremely grateful to all contributors -- and especially those whom I invited to submit their own stories and discoveries. The subject matter is unlimited. The combination of submissions in this issue indicates the wealth and variety of topics available for research. The published articles demonstrate, emphatically, the assiduity and scrupulous ardour of the diverse community of people whose lives and careers have led them into these fields of research. There is still much more to be discovered. I sincerely hope that this themed issue of MNJ will stimulate further research into the diverse aspects of the natural history of Borneo.

**CRANBROOK**

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