Borneo – island of head-hunters, orang-utans and mighty Mount Kinabalu, the highest peak between the Himalayas and New Guinea. For several centuries after its discovery by Europeans this great equatorial island remained shrouded in mystery. Fables grew up about the ‘Wild Men of Borneo’, the fearsome Dyaks who brought the heads of their enemies back to their longhouses. In the 19th century the island came under British and Dutch colonial rule, passing later, with the exception of the tiny sultanate of Brunei, to newly independent Malaysia and Indonesia. Even today settlement is largely confined to coastal areas and much of the interior remains remote.

From a wildlife viewpoint Borneo offers the chance to see bird tour if ever there was one, offers the chance to see Bornean Bristleheads, the island’s endemic bird family (Craig Robson) Barbets, Whitehead’s Broadbill, Bornean Leafbird, Bornean Bulbul, Bare-headed Laughingthrush, the miniscule Pygmy White-eye (or Pygmy Ibon) and Whitehead’s Spiderhunter.

The majestic, rugged massif of Mount Kinabalu rises to 4101m, towering above the surrounding lowlands. Kinabalu dwarfs all other mountains in Borneo and the temperate climate at higher levels has resulted in the evolution of many endemic plants and animals. We should see many of Borneo’s endemics here, including Crimson-headed and Red-breasted Partridges, Bornean Swiftlet, the Whitehead’s Trogon, Golden-naped Barbet, the vivid Whitehead’s Broadbill, Fruit-hunter, Bornean Green Magpie, Bornean Treepie, Mountain Wren-Babbler, Chestnut-hooded Laughingthrush, Chestnut-crested Yuhina, and the diminutive Bornean Stubbtail, Kinabalu Friendly Warbler, Bornean Whistling-Thrush, Bornean Forktail, Bornean Whistler, Eyebrowed Jungle Flycatcher, Black-sided Flowerpecker, Mountain Black-eye and Black-capped White-eye.

During this exciting journey we shall explore the state of Sabah in northern Borneo, which is politically part of Malaysia, visiting several very different areas in which the great majority of Borneo’s 52 avian endemics can be found.

Our journey commences at Kota Kinabalu, the provincial capital, where we shall explore some areas of wetland and grassland, but we shall pause only briefly at the coast before heading off into the interior, first visiting the Rafflesia Forest Reserve in the Crocker Range and then Kinabalu Park. Here we have our first chances for such endemics as Bornean and Mountain Hornbill, the shy endemic Bornean Ground-Cuckoo and the endemic Dusky Munia, as well as the curious and fascinating Proboscis Monkey along the forest-fringed Kinabatangan River. This fine area also offers us our first chance for the charismatic Bornean Bristlehead, as well as many other lowland species.

The high points of our journey through the eastern lowlands will be our stays at Tabin Wildlife Reserve and finally the beautiful Danum Valley Conservation Area. Here we will visit both primary and secondary lowland rainforest with its rich avifauna, and we should see wild Bornean Orang-utans, the kings of the Bornean jungle, moving through this superb forest.

Notable birds we will be looking for at Danum and Tabin include White-fronted Falconet, the gorgeous Blue-headed Pitta, Black-crowned Pitta, the stunning Blue-banded Pitta, Bornean Banded Pitta, Bornean Black Magpie, the strange Bornean Ground Babbler, Black-throated Wren-Babbler, Bornean Blue Flycatcher, Bornean Spiderhunter and Yellow-rumped Flowerpecker. We also have a high chance for Bornean Bristlehead during our explorations at Danum.

By the end of our travels through Sabah we will certainly appreciate why Borneo is considered such an important area by
conservationists, for its fauna and flora are remarkable indeed.

During the optional extension we will explore neighbouring Sarawak, another province of Malaysia. Borneo is one of the world's great endemic hotspots, and while most of its special birds are routinely encountered on our tour to Sabah, a number of species are either very difficult or even impossible to find there. We have devised this extension to the adjacent state of Sarawak to focus particularly on such species.

We will concentrate on three main sites, Ba'kelalan (for Dullit Frogmouth), Paya Maga (where we will be looking for Black Oriole and Bornean Frogmouth) and Barito National Park (where we have a real but probably under 50% chance of Bulwer's Pheasant and a really good chance for Hose's Broadbill). At each site we also have a chance of encountering such rarely seen endemic species as Mountain Serpent Eagle and Bornean and Blue-banded Pittas, plus a host of other Bornean and Sundac specialties. We will also visit a site just over the border in Sabah to look for the rarely seen Hook-billed Bulbul and the uncommon Scarlet-breasted Flowerpecker.

Birdquest has operated tours to Borneo since 1987.

Itinerary

Day 1 The tour begins in the late morning at Kota Kinabalu in Sabah in northern Borneo, where we will overnight. Surprisingly modern, the city was completely rebuilt after Allied bombing in the Second World War and has grown greatly in recent decades. Interesting forest habitat with endemic birds is too far away for a visit today, so we will look for birds on the outskirts of the city, where there still remain some areas of tidal mudflats, wetlands and grasslands. Here we should find Malaysian Plover, while more widespread species we may well see in these habitats include Purple and Striated (or Little) Herons, Javan Pond Heron, Eastern Cattle, Great, Intermediate, Little and Pacific Reef Egrets, Yellow and Cinnamon Bittens, Black-shouldered Kite, White-breowed Crane, White-breasted Waterhen, Black-backed Swamphen, Common Moorhen, Long-toed Stint, Black-winged Stilt, Oriental Pratincole, Whiskered Tern, Spotted and Zebra (or Peaceful) Doves, Lesser Coucal, Glossy Swiftlet, House Swift, Asian Palm Swift, Collared Kingfisher, Bluethrated Bee-eater, Pacific and Barn Swallow, Yellow-vented Bulbul, Pied Triller, Striated Warbler, Yellow-bellied Prinia, Pied Fantail, Paddyfield Pipit, White-breasted Wood Swallow, Asian Glossy Starling, Olive-backed Sunbird, Eurasian Tree Sparrow and Chestnut Munia. We may also find Watercock, a species only recently confirmed to be breeding in Borneo, Buff-banded Rail (another recent colonist) and possibly Greater Painted-Snipe. An area of coastal casuarina trees holds Sunda Woodpecker, House Crow (a recent ship-assisted, arrival) and three introduced species: Blue-naped Parrot, Crested Myna and Java Sparrow.

Day 2 This morning we will make an early start for the Rafflesia Forest Reserve, situated in the Crocker Range to the south of Kota Kinabalu. The Crocker Range shares many of Borneo's montane endemics with Mount Kinabalu, but this area, lying at middle altitudes, offers better opportunities for seeing a few endemic species which are often harder to find at Kinabalu itself. In particular, we will be looking for such endemics as Bornean and Mountain Barbet, Bornean Leaflight (split from Blue-winged) and Bornean (split from Black-crested) Bulbul, Bare-headed Laughingthrush and the uncommon Whitehead's Spiderhunter, and we will also have a first chance to find the stunning Whitehead's Broadbill and the tiny endemic Pygmy White-eye (or Pygmy Ibon), a species so small and drab that it can easily be overlooked. There is even a real but slim chance for the Mountain Serpent Eagle.

Other species we may find here include Mountain Imperial Pigeon, Ruddy Cuckoo-Dove, Temminck's Babbler and the Sundac-endemic Cinereous (split from Ashy) Bulbul.

The Rafflesia itself, which produces the world's largest flower, is capricious in its flowering and it lasts just a few days, so we would be lucky indeed to come across one of these giant blooms. Afterwards we will drive to Kinabalu Park, situated high on the slopes of Mount Kinabalu, for a four nights stay. We should arrive in time for some initial exploration.

Days 3-5 The immense bare granite massif of Mount Kinabalu (4101m) towers high above the forests clothing its lower slopes. Although the summit is frequently cloaked in low cloud and mist, it is generally visible in the early morning, allowing stunning views. Mount Kinabalu is a naturalist's paradise – an island of montane forest amongst a sea of cultivated lowlands. Millions of years of isolation have resulted in a high degree of endemism amongst the fauna and especially the flora – over half the plant species above 1000m are endemic, and there are perhaps 600 species of orchids on the mountain and no less than nine species of the extraordinary pitcher-plants.

Two-thirds of Borneo's endemic birds are found here, one of which, the Friendly Bush Warbler, is found only on Kinabalu and neighbouring peaks. With increasing altitude, there is a succession of different forest types. Above 1200m true montane forest commences; initially dominated by oaks and chestnuts with a dense ground cover, this gradually gives way to cloud forest characterized by garleed, stunted trees (including many rhododendrons) encrusted with mosses, lichens and orchids nourished by the frequent mist and high rainfall. Finally, above the treeline, there is an open subalpine zone of bushes and dwarf shrubs below the formidable crags and gigantic rock buttresses of the summit.

Around the park headquarters, situated at 1563m (5128ft) in the lower montane zone, the climate is pleasantly temperate.
and there is an excellent network of roads and forest trails. Over the next few days birdwatching at Kinabalu will take on a familiar pattern, with the majority of species being fairly conspicuous and easy to see from the roads, but a minority (including some of the most sought-after) being more or less confined to the trails, where the pace is much slower, and birds rather harder to find.

A notable feature of the area is the noisy flocks that appear at first light at the roadside. These flocks typically contain endemic Chestnut-hooded (split from Chestnut-capped) Laughingthrushes, Sunda Laughingthrushes, Ashy and Hair-crested Drongos, Indigo Flycatchers, White-throated Fantail and dozens of endemic Chestnut-crested Yuhinas and Black-capped White-eyes.

We will make a particular effort to find the more retiring endemics, including the shy Crimson-headed and Red-breasted Partridges, the vivid, electric-green Whitehead's Broadbill, the sedate and unobtrusive Whitehead's Trogon, Black-breasted Fruit-hunter (or simply Fruit-hunter, once thought to be a triller but now considered to show close affinities with the thrushes), the vociferous Mountain Wren-Babbler and the diminutive Bornean Stubtail (with a song so high pitched that it is barely audible).

On one morning we will start along the steep summit trail into the upper montane or ‘cloud forest’ zone. We will hopefully not have to go too far before we find the endemic Friendly Bush Warbler, a bird which often lives up to its name as it can be enticed to within a metre or so (too close for binoculars), as well as the endemic Pale-faced Bulbul (split from Flavescent), Sunda Bush Warbler and the endemic Mountain Black-eye.

Additional endemics we will be looking for on Kinabalu include Bornean Swiftlet (split from Cave), Golden-naped Barbet, the stunning Bornean Green Magpie (split from Short-tailed), Bornean Treeeip, Bornean Whistling-Thrush, Bornean Forktail (split from White-crowned), Everett’s Thrush (more likely to be heard than seen), Bornean Whistler, Eyebrowed Jungle Flycatcher, Black-sided Flowerpecker.

Other species we may well find include Black Eagle, Blyth’s Hawk-Eagle, Little Cuckoo-Dove, Sunda Cuckoo (split from Oriental), Crimson-winged, Checker-throated and Maroon Woodpeckers, Sunda Cuckoo-Shrike, Grey-chinned Minivet, Ochraceous Bulbul, Black-and-crimson Oriole, Grey-throated Babbler, White-browed Shrike-Babbler, the skulking White-browed Shortwing, Mountain Leaf and Yellow-breasted Warblers, Mountain Tailorbird, Indigo, Snowy-browed and Little Pied Flycatchers, Velvet-fronted Nuthatch and Temminck’s Sunbird. An excursion after dark should allow us to hear Mountain Scops Owl, but seeing this species is very difficult.

The only mammals we are likely to encounter on Kinabalu are a variety of squirrels (including two species of tiny pygmy squirrels) and tree shrews.

Day 6 After some early morning birding at Mount Kinabalu, we will drive southwards and then southwards to Sukau for a three nights stay at the Kinabatangan River.

En route we will visit the famous Gomantong Caves. This huge cave system, penetrating far inside a massive limestone outcrop, is probably the largest in Sabah and is the home of literally millions of swiftlets and bats. Leaving the bright sunshine behind, we will enter a cool world of perpetual darkness with its own very different ecosystem ranging from tiny mites to spectacular long-legged centipedes. Inside the cavernous, cathedral-sized main cave we will be able to watch Black-nest, Mossy-nest and Glossy Swiftlets, and perhaps Edible-nest Swiftlets, on their noticeably differing nests, the only really safe way to tell them apart! Ropes suspended from the roof of the cave and flimsy bamboo scaffolding have been used for a thousand years to collect the nests of Edible-nest and Black-nest Swiftlets for soup, although nowadays the nests can only be collected after the breeding season.

At dusk, clouds of bats emerge from the caves like swarms of mosquitoes and several Bat Hawks are usually in attendance to prey on them; indeed this is one of the most reliable places to see this interesting and elusive raptor. They are often accompanied by one or two Peregrine Falcons of the rather dark local race, and it is surprising how similar these two raptors can appear in flight, as the Peregrines catch bats too.

The small forest reserve surrounding the caves is rich in birds. Here we shall be hoping to see Black-throated Babbler in particular, amongst a range of species.

Days 7-8 While based at our riverside lodge at Sukau, we will explore some of the shadier and quieter stretches of Kinabatangan and other local rivers by boat in search of the extraordinary Proboscis Monkey, which is endemic to Borneo. As well as this bizarre creature, surely one of the most unlikely simians of all, we are likely to find Silvered Langur (or Silvered Leaf Monkey) and Long-tailed Macaque, and we also have another chance for Orang-utan.

The flood-plain forests at Sukau hold a wealth of birds and we will be looking in particular for the highly localized Wrinkled Hornbill,
the rare and enigmatic Storm's Stork, the uncommon Jordon's Baza, the rare and retiring endemic Bornean Ground-Cuckoo (which takes both persistence and luck to see) and the endemic Dusky Munia. We will have our first chance for the strange Bornean Bristlehead here, although it is observed more frequently at Danum Valley.

On one morning we will make an early start so that we can arrive at the right section of forest before dawn. We will be hoping to hear the rather crow-like cawing of the Sunda Frogmouth and then catch sight of this elusive species sitting high above us under the forest canopy.

Amongst the other species we may well see at the Kinabatangan are Oriental Darter, Black-crowned Night Heron, Lesser Adjutant, Brahminy Kite, White-bellied Sea Eagle, Lesser Fish Eagle, Crested Goshawk, Green Imperial Pigeon, Little and Thick-billed Green Pigeons, Emerald Dove, Long-tailed Parakeet, Blue-eared and Stork-billed Kingfishers, Oriental Pied Hornbill, the huge Great Slaty Woodpecker, Rufous Woodpecker, Black-and-red Broadbill, Asian Red-eyed, Black-headed, Cream-vented and Olive-winged Bulbuls, Common Iora, White-chested Babbler, Malaysian Blue Flycatcher, Asian Paradise-Flycatcher, Oriental Magpie-Robin (of a distinctive, near-black form), Crimson Sunbird and Orange-bellied Flowerpecker. We also have a good chance of seeing Hooded Pitta, a characteristic species of the riverside forests, and scarcer species may include Grey-headed Fish Eagle.

**Day 10** After a last early morning at Sukau we will travel to the Lahad Datu region. We will spend a total of six nights here, two at Tabin Wildlife Reserve followed by four at the famous Danum Valley Conservation Area. We should arrive in time for some initial exploration.

**Days 11-14** Tabin Wildlife Reserve protects a large area of secondary forest where many lowland species, including the uncommon Bornean Banded Pitta (recently split from Banded) and Barred Eagle-Owl, are easier to see than at Danum. For the most part, however, there is a massive overlap between the two locations and many birds are just as likely at the one as at the other, so there is no point in trying to divide up the species between them. Leopard Cats are much more often seen at Tabin on night drives and Orang-utan sightings are quite regular.

The Danum Valley Conservation Area contains some of the most accessible untouched lowland rainforest in Sabah (and indeed in the whole of Borneo). Gigantic trees (some reaching over 80m tall, creating the tallest canopy of any rainforest), clambering lianas, spectacular butterflies, strange-looking insects and a bewildering variety of birds are all integral features of this superbly-balanced and stable environment – the end-product of millions of years of evolution. Rainforests are the richest habitat on earth and those of South-east Asia are the richest of all. There are more tree species here than in Amazonia and this floristic wealth has a profound influence on the avifauna.

Many bird families reach their greatest diversity in rainforests such as this, different species adapting to different modes of life whether in the sunlit canopy or on the gloomy forest floor. Our lodge is situated near the banks of the Danum River and is surrounded by forest. As dawn breaks an ethereal mist hangs over the trees, but as the sun slowly rises this starts to lift, and the chorus of broadbills, babbler, bulbuls and endemic White-crowned Shamas is soon joined by the superbly evocative bubbles and trills of Bornean Gibbons as each of the local family groups greets the new day with their song. The numerous flowering and fruiting trees around the lodge attract a good variety of birds, and in just a few minutes we can access an excellent network of trails which will lead us deep into the shade of the forest, where sound becomes an all-important means to locate birds.

Danum Valley hosts a superb selection of species, and we have an excellent chance of finding many of the local endemic specialities. These include the gorgeous Blue-headed Pitta, a bird which very much lives up to the old name for the family of ‘jewel thrush’ as it bounds over the forest floor. In contrast, the distinctive Black-crowned (or Black-and-crimson) Pitta (split from Garnet) sits calling in the deepest shadows, glowing like a hot coal. Rather harder to find the stunning Blue-banded Pitta and Bornean Banded Pitta (now an endemic following the taxonomic reorganization of the Banded Pitta complex). With just a bit of luck we will find a Bornean Ground Babbler walking like a miniature rail over the ground, whilst its close relative, the stocky Black-throated Wren-Babbler, ascends into the trees to scold us.

Amongst other Bornean endemics we will be concentrating on during our visit are White-fronted Falconet, Bornean Black Magpie (split from Black), Bornean Blue Flycatcher,
Bornean Spiderhunter and Yellow-rumped Flowerpecker. The greatest prize here is the strange endemic Bornean Bristlehead (now elevated to its own monotypic family), and we will hope to hear its strange whistles and growls coming from the canopy and then catch sight of a party of these strawberry-headed enigmas moving through the tree tops.

The most spectacular of Danum's birds are surely the hornbills, and the raucous trumpeting of Rhinoceros Hornbills as a party flies overhead should become a familiar sound. Helmeted Hornbills are also very vocal, giving a succession of ‘toohoop’ notes culminating in a manic ‘chop-your-mother-down’ crescendo, but they are often much shyer and harder to get views of. Other hornbill species at Danum include Bushy-crested, Banded and Yellow-vented Flowerpeckers. Many mammals inhabit the reserve and some of the species that we are likely to see during night excursions are Greater Mouse-Deer, Sambar Deer and Thomas’s and Red Giant Flying Squirrels. We should also see a number of the scarcer species, which include Common Giant Squirrel, Black Flying Squirrel, Bornean Pygmy Elephant, Lesser Mouse-Deer, Common Palm, Masked Palm, Banded Palm and Malay Civets, Binturong, Leopard Cat and Malay Weasel.

The reserve also has one of the largest populations of Bornean Orang-utans in Borneo and we should again see these magnificent apes in their forest kingdom, a truly thrilling sight. Other regularly observed primates include Sunda Pigtail Macaque, the beautiful Maroon Langur (or Red Leaf Monkey) and Bornean Gibbon.

Day 15 After some final birding at Danum Valley we will drive to Lahad Datu airport, where the tour ends this afternoon.

Sarawak Extension Itinerary

Day 15 We will return by air to Kota Kinabalu for an overnight stay.

Day 16 We will set off early today so that we can explore the Klias Wetland reserve before the day heats up. Our targets here are the rare, restricted-range Hook-billed Bulbul and other peat swamp forest specialities including Scarlet-breasted Flowerpecker and Red-capped Barbet.

Later we will continue across the Sarawak border until we reach Lawas where we will spend the night.

Day 17 Using 4x4 vehicles we will head up into the highlands of eastern Sarawak until we reach the town of Ba’kelalan where we will stay for two nights. We will arrive in time for some initial exploration.

Day 18 Ba’kelalan is a fairly

Bornean Spiderhunter and Yellow-rumped Flowerpecker.

Whitehead's Broadbill (Craig Robson)
recently discovered site for the almost unknown Dulit Frogmouth, which we have a good chance of finding during our visit. Many of the birds listed for Paya Maga, our next venue, are also present in this little visited area, giving us a first opportunity in Sarawak to track down some of the more elusive species. This is a particularly good site for the endemic Black-throated Wren-Babbler.

**Day 19**  We will backtrack towards Lawas this morning with our vehicles and then walk for about 2 hours uphill to our campsite at around 1700m (5578ft) at Paya Maga, where we will stay for two nights. This afternoon we will have our first chance to explore the surroundings.

**Day 20**  Here at Paya Maga we will be in the prime habitat of the little-known Black Oriole, a species endemic to the eastern Sarawak highlands and which until very recently had never been seen by modern ornithologists. Nocturnal excursions in the area will give us a good chance of finding the enigmatic Bornean Frogmouth, another very poorly known endemic species.

This area holds many other exciting endemic species, several of which can be difficult to connect with in Sarabah, including Mountain Serpent Eagle, Rufous-breasted and Crimson-headed Partridges, Whitehead's and Hose's Broadbills, Blue-banded and Bornean Banded Pittas, Pygmy Ibon, the recently split Bornean Forktail and Whitehead's Spiderhunter.

Some of the other Bornean endemics we have a good chance of finding at Paya Maga include Mountain and Bornean Barbets, Bornean Treepie, Bornean Leafbird, Bare-headed Laughingthrush, Mountain Black-eye and Bornean Stubbail.

More widespread Sundaic species recorded here include Ferruginous Partridge, Great Argus, Barred Eagle-Owl, Crested Jay, Bock's and Malaysian Hawk-Cuckoos, Straw-headed and Finsch’s Bulbuls, Temminck’s Babbler and the enigmatic and much sought-after Rail Babbler.

**Day 21**  After some final birding at Paya Maga we will descend to the road and drive back to Lawas for an overnight stay.

**Day 22**  We will take a morning flight westwards to Miri and then a connecting flight to Bario, a town deep in the interior of Borneo and not far from the Indonesian province of Kalimantan. We will stay here for four nights and should have time for some initial exploration this afternoon.

**Days 23-25**  During our time in the Bario area we will search for the very rarely seen Bulwer’s Pheasant. This is a notoriously elusive species and realistically we have perhaps a 40% chance of connecting with it, though our efforts will certainly have been worthwhile if we do succeed!

Furthermore, at Bario we have a final opportunity to seek out any of the specialties we may have missed earlier as many of the Bario/Paya Maga species are also present and this is an especially good area for Mountain Serpent Eagle. In particular, the rarely encountered and much sought-after Hose’s Broadbill is more likely here than elsewhere, especially if we encounter any of the fruiting trees favoured by this stunning species.

Some additional species possible at the lower elevations at Bario include Sunda Scops Owl, Malaysian Eared Nightjar, Cinnamon-rumped Trogon and Rufous-tailed Jungle-Flycatcher.

**Day 26**  From Bario we will take a morning flight back to Miri where the extension ends. (There are a number of flights daily between Miri and Kuala Lumpur or Kota Kinabalu.)

**Accommodation & Road Transport:**  The hotels/lodges are of good to medium standard throughout the main tour and for some of the extension. At Ba’kelalan and Bario we will use simple homestay accommodation, while at Paya Maga we will stay for 2 nights in a simple camp set up by our local outfitters. Road transport is by small coach or minibus (or 4x4 vehicles in some parts of Sarawak) and roads are good in Sabah, much more variable in Sarawak.

**Walking:**  The walking effort is mostly easy or moderate, but there will be at least one optional fairly demanding walk on Mount Kinabalu. The hike up to our campsite at Paya Maga in Sarawak is mostly moderate but fairly demanding at times.

**Climate:**  At low altitudes mostly hot, dry and sunny, but overcast and rainy weather is not infrequent. On Mount Kinabalu conditions are similar but temperatures range from warm to cool (even fairly cold early in the morning high on Mount Kinabalu). It is often very humid.

**Bird/Mammal Photography:**  Opportunities are worthwhile.