

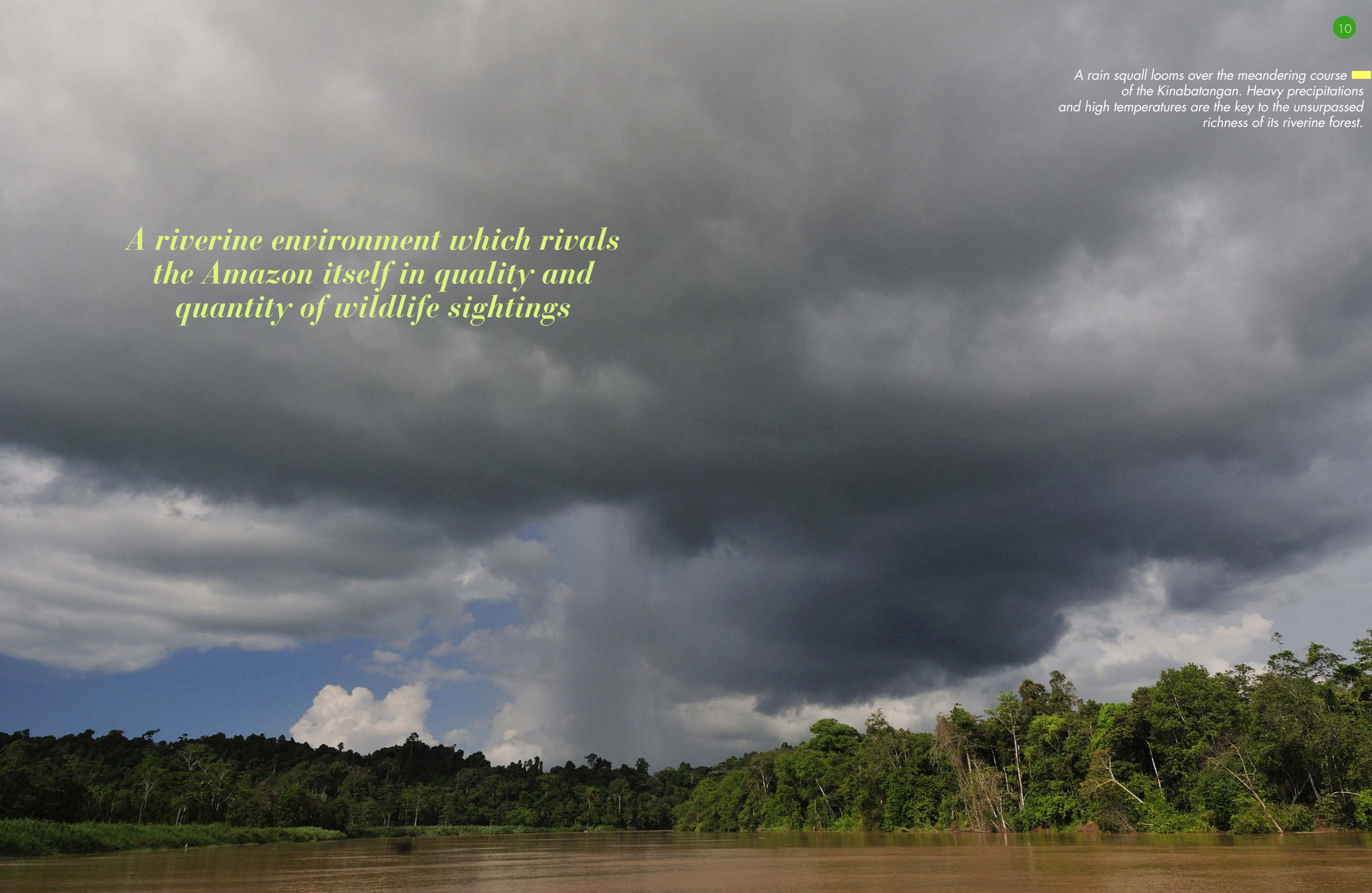
BORNEO'S KINABATANGAN  
**THE RIVER  
OF LIFE**

One of the world's most beautiful wildlife reserves - and one of the least known - Sabah's mighty water body is a treasure trove of rare and fascinating South-East Asian species

■ A subadult male Temple Pit viper *Tropidolaemus subannulatus* lies in ambush among the riverine foliage. This beautiful species used to be known as *Trimeresurus wagleri* until recently.

A rain squall looms over the meandering course of the Kinabatangan. Heavy precipitations and high temperatures are the key to the unsurpassed richness of its riverine forest.

*A riverine environment which rivals the Amazon itself in quality and quantity of wildlife sightings*



TEXT BY ANDREA FERRARI  
PHOTOS BY ANDREA & ANTONELLA FERRARI

The lowland riverine forest encompassing the extensive Kinabatangan river basin and its 26,000 hectares Wildlife Sanctuary has few rivals in the world for remoteness, richness of animal species and just sheer natural beauty. At the same time, this spectacular, somewhat little-known and mostly untouched wilderness of Malaysian Borneo is very accessible and easily explored – usually by small boat during the day, and by foot at night or late evening. Departing from the harbour of nearby Sandakan – a pleasant coastal town aptly named “Gateway to Borneo’s

Wildlife” – visitors can easily reach the Sanctuary’s headquarters in Sukau – where most of the tourist lodges are located – by a scenic one-hour long boat trip which ends at one of the riverside resorts’ piers. An inland route has also been opened recently, so visitors can also easily reach their lodge of choice by vehicle, with only a few minutes by boat left before reaching their final destination. The land route is admittedly faster, but much less interesting visually. More and more guesthouses, jungle camps and fully-fledged forest lodges have been recently popping up along the

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■ A young Saltwater or Estuarine Crocodile *Crocodylus porosus* basks on a muddy bank of the Menanggol – a tributary to the Kinabatangan – at the peak of the rainy season.





An Oriental Darter *Anhinga melanogaster* dries its feathers in the sun after a dive in the muddy waters of the Menanggal.

river's banks, all offering excellent accomodations (of varying level and cost, but all very clean and very well organized), good standards and very tasty Sabahan food, often using locally acquired, fresh organic products such as delicious vegetables or fruit and big river prawns grown and farmed by the local *Orang Sungai* (river people). The best way to visit the Kinabatangan river basin with its enormous, eerily beautiful oxbow lagoons and many small, twisting tributaries is by booking a week-long stay via a specialized wildlife travel agency in Sandakan - service is usually excellent and specific needs of visitors are normally very well cared for. We always try to visit in May or October, ie just at the end or just before the start of the rainy season, avoiding the July-August peak of the tourist season, when veritable fleets of small tourist-filled boats sadly strip the

Kinabatangan of its magical, primordial atmosphere. Regularly subject to tides and periodical inundations during the rainy season, in a perennial state of flux and sparsely populated along its banks by small fishing and farming communities, the Kinabatangan river basin represents a very unique natural environment, peacefully shared by humans and wildlife alike.

**GOOD ACCOMODATION AND GREAT GUIDES**

The Kinabatangan river basin is a wildlife photographer's dream come true, as most Borneo wildlife is not only richly represented in the area but also often easily sighted and photographed in the vicinity of Sukau, provided one knows where and when to look. This is obviously a destination where the

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■ The Menanggal's riverbanks are graced by countless, often colorful flowers immediately after the end of the rains.



■ *Adult Crested  
Serpent eagle  
Spilornis cheela*  
- one of the most  
commonly  
observed large  
raptors of the  
Kinabatangan  
river basin,  
often seen  
perching or  
soaring above  
the forest  
canopy.





■ A female Rhinoceros Hornbill *Buceros rhinoceros*, identified by the light blue eye ringed in red. In the males of this truly incredible species the eye is black. This is a reasonably common sight in the Kinabatangan river basin area.

services of an experienced local wildlife guide are a must, especially for those taking their exploring and photography seriously. After a number of visits spanning many years' time, we can safely recommend the services of Cede Prudente, a very gifted local wildlife photographer who caters to others' needs via his agency **North Borneo Safaris** - but we hasten to add that most of the local guides and boatmen offer an uncommonly high degree of professionalism, guaranteeing good wildlife viewing opportunities and a comforting degree of information. Remember to take with you a good telephoto (VR-equipped or with a sturdy tripod) for all the big and not so big species you'll observe during the day from the safety of your boat, plus a good flash set-up and your macro lens of choice for all the weird and wonderful little critters you'll see at night. Being this Borneo, a sun hat and a lightweight rain poncho are nice to have around, especially if you plan to spend a lot of time exploring the river

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■ Primates are exceptionally well represented in the Kinabatangan river basin area. Left, a wild adult female *Orangutan Pongo pygmaeus* with her baby. Right, top, a rare sight as a dominant male *Proboscis monkey Nasalis larvatus* briefly descends to the ground; right, bottom, two *Long-tailed or Crab-eating Macaque Macaca fascicularis* engage in grooming.







The truly beautiful Pied Hornbill *Anthracoceros coronatus* is the most easily observed species - among hornbills - in the Kinabatangan river basin area.

Amphibians are present in great numbers in the riverine rainforest of the Kinabatangan, especially during the rainy season from November to April. This is the ubiquitous - and very colorful - Harlequin Tree Frog *Rhacophorus pardalis*.



by boat. Night walks are safe and easy, but bring a pair of strong, comfortable jungle or trekking ankle boots and a small torch with you, and be prepared to get very wet and very muddy - with the added boost of leeches in wet weather.

### WHERE TO GO AND WHAT TO SEE

The average day in Sukau starts just before dawn, with the faraway *hok-hok* of some distant hornbill welcoming the first warm rays of the sun over the steaming jungle - after a lovely breakfast at the lodge, visitors hurry down the riverside jetty to board a small, low aluminum canoe powered by both petrol and electric engines to start the day's explorations. The boats are lightweight, flat-bottomed and very stable, making an excellent platform for a photographer's tripod - the local boatmen employed by the lodges take great pride and are very good at switching from petrol to electric just at the right time to allow as close an approach to wildlife as humanly possible. Most exploration takes place at a leisurely pace along the Kinabatangan muddy banks and up its small, meandering tributary, the extraordinarily scenic Menanggal - it's

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■ The insect life of Borneo is rightfully legendary - and can offer some rather impressive encounters. Left, a Lantern bug *Pyrops whiteheadi*, family Fulgoridae; right, the colorful nymph of the aptly-named Shield bug *Pycanum rubens*.



*A dangerous beauty quietly coiled among the leaves by the river's edge*

■ A stunningly beautiful adult - and probably pregnant - female Temple Pit Viper *Tropidolaemus subannulatus*. This is a venomous but very calm and hardly aggressive species, typically found among the vegetation overhanging the river's edge.





At the end of the wet season many primates are often seen foraging for the abundant fruits of the forest. Far left, Long-tailed or Crab-eating Macaque *Macaca fascicularis*; left, adult male Proboscis monkey *Nasalis larvatus*.

a good idea to book one's accomodation as close as possible to its mouth, as the winding course of the forest-canopied Menanggol is a favourite destination for wildlife enthusiast and birdwatchers visiting the Kinabatangan area, so to enjoy it at is most evocative, unpopulated best it's better to get there before anybody else, immediately after sunrise. If you're staying at a lodge close to its mouth you'll also be able to linger around for a longer time in the evening before going back for dinner and your night walk. If you can afford it and are serious about your wildlife photography, go for your own personal guide and boat - it will surely make a difference. The thickly forested area around Sukau itself - this is prime virgin lowland dipterocarp country - makes extended exploration on foot rather difficult, but that around the village of Abai - somewhat downriver and closer to the coast and the sea - allows excellent walks on well-maintained secondary forest trails and boardwalks, offering wonderful opportunities for safe, comfortable and very fruitful night walks. Even closer to the coast and branching out to the Sulu sea itself, the immense estuary of the Kinabatangan in the vicinity of Abai is clogged in thick, labyrinthine, impenetrable forest of mangroves and *Nypa* palms - primordially beautiful and rich in species but not easily explored or - thankfully - exploited. You will have

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*Wallace's Hawk-eagle* ■  
*Spizaetus nanus,*  
*a fast-flying*  
*raptor which*  
*usually prefers*  
*the forest canopy.*

*Life is abundant  
everywhere -  
even on vertical,  
towering  
tree trunks*



Giant Forest Gecko █  
Gekko smithi,  
a true master  
of the fine art  
of camouflage.



■ Top left, Pied Hornbill *Anthracoceros coronatus*; top right, male Wrinkled Hornbill *Rhyticeros corrugatus*. Bottom left, female Rhinoceros Hornbill *Buceros rhinoceros*; bottom right, male Black Hornbill *Anthracoceros malayanus*.





A unique encounter - an adult male Orangutan *Pongo pygmaeus* feeding on wild figs in the morning mist.

■ Storm's Stork  
*Ciconia stormi*  
is a large and rather  
colorful bird usually  
seen in small groups  
perching on treetops.



excellent opportunities to admire this unique environment on your way to and from Sukau if you are reaching your lodge by boat. Encroached on all sides by rapidly developing oil palm plantations - the scourge of Borneo's primeval forests - and endangered by logging plantations which severely curtail the larger animals' migratory routes and forest corridors, the Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary is nevertheless officially considered today to be one of the most important and pristine areas of wilderness in the whole world, and as such it cannot be missed by wildlife enthusiasts - floating down its murky, deep, slow-flowing waters is like taking a veritable trip back in time.

**A VERITABLE HEAVEN FOR WILDLIFE LOVERS**

But what about the animals one can hope to see? Well, we know very few areas outside of the African plains and the Venezuelan Llanos where one can hope to observe and photograph such spectacular amounts of tropical wildlife. Remember always, however...this is South-East Asia, not the Serengeti! Commonly sighted reptile species here are Estuarine or Saltwater crocodiles (with some very big individuals occasionally sighted up close), Reticulate pythons, Mangrove and Dog-toothed cat snakes, bright green Temple Pit vipers and very large Water monitors, while among the 250 bird

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■ Top left, Crested Serpent eagle *Spilornis cheela*;  
top right, Grey-headed Fish-eagle *Ichthyophaga  
ichhyaetus*. Bottom left, Brahminy Kite *Haliastur indus*;  
bottom right, Lesser Fish-eagle *Ichthyophaga nana*.





■ Bornean Pygmy Elephant *Elephas maximus borneensis* feeding by the river's edge in the evening. This is an endemic subspecies, uniquely found in Borneo.

species found in the area one can sight - among others - several species of large hornbills (including the spectacular Rhinoceros Hornbill), Fish-eagles, Buffy owls, kingfishers, cuckoos and darters; among the large mammals, wild pigs, dwarf Bornean elephants, river otters, leaf monkeys, Long-tailed Macaques, wild Orangutans and Proboscis monkeys are commonly observed, often up close and at length. In fact, the Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary is the best spot anywhere to observe the rare elephant of Borneo, a smallish and friendlier cousin of the Indian one which has recently been awarded its own species status, and of course the iconic and unmistakable Proboscis monkey. This is also the land of flying snakes and flying frogs, while those interested in insects and spiders - often quite large and very colorful - will keep their cameras clicking away, especially if going out at night and with a warm tropical drizzle shrouding the thick

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*The impressive Buffy Fish-Owl Ketupa ketupu can often be encountered at night along sluggish streams or the main river's edge as it hunts for fish in shallow water.*



More examples of night life in the Kinabatangan. Left, Harlequin Tree Frog *Rhacophorus pardalis*; middle, a large katydid moulting in the dark; right, the omnipresent Huntsman or Giant Crab spider, *Heteropoda* sp..



■ Reticulate pythons  
*Python reticulatus* are  
often seen prowling the  
mudbanks at the river's  
edge after dark.  
This large species  
often preys on sleeping  
macaques or Proboscis  
monkeys in the treetops.





Tree trunks host a variety of species besides geckoes. Left, Bark-mimic Moth *Eupterote asclepiades*; right, the truly unique Colugo or Flying Lemur *Cynocephalus variegatus*, a master of camouflage not easily seen.







Blue-eared Kingfisher *Alcedo meninting*, possibly the most commonly observed kingfisher of the Kinabatangan river basin area.

forest. All in all, the Kinabatangan river basin is a treasure trove of rare, endangered and fascinating tropical species, all to be found and often easily observed in a landscape of unrivalled beauty and isolation. As a choice destination for the discerning wildlife photographer and nature enthusiast, it truly has few equals anywhere in the world, and one can only hope its currently protected status will keep it healthy, safe and relatively untouched for many, many more years in the future.

**DON'T MISS THE SECOND INSTALLMENT OF OUR KINABATANGAN STORY – COMING IN OCTOBER 2013 ON ISSUE 12 OF ANIMA MUNDI – ADVENTURES IN WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHY!**



Small but stunning Spiny Orb Spiders belonging to the *Gasteracantha* genus are often seen along the Kinabatangan. Correct identification of the several species present is however difficult for the non-specialist.



*A new day dawns on  
the riverine rainforest  
of the Kinabatangan*

The golden light of dawn and the ever-present morning mist offer interesting opportunities to the landscape photographer.




Left, Smooth-backed Gliding Gecko *Ptychozoon lionotum*; middle, Green Cicada *Dundubia vaginata*; far right, a Huntsman Spider *Heteropoda* sp. indulges in cannibalistic behavior as it preys on another spider of the same species.





Locally - and rather aptly - known as "banana snake", the large Grey-tailed Racer *Gonyosoma oxycephalum* is found here in a stunning yellow morph rather than in the bright green, red-tailed color phase seen elsewhere in South-East Asia.



■ Bathed in the warm golden evening light, the Menanggol tributary offers a serene landscape of unsurpassed natural elegance.



■ The fruit season in late April and early May offers great photo opportunities to visitors. Left, adult male Proboscis monkey *Nasalis larvatus*; right, Pig-tailed Macaque *Macaca nemestrina*.



Close-up portrait  
of a large Giant Crab or  
Huntsman spider *Heteropoda*  
*sp.*, very commonly found  
on vertical tree trunks.  
This species is capable  
of surprising bursts of speed.



*Ready to spring  
at lightning speed  
on its unwary prey*





Top left, Black Hornbill  
*Anthracoceros malayanus*, female;  
 top right, White-crested  
 or White-crowned Hornbill  
*Berenicornis comatus*.  
 Bottom right, Black Hornbill  
*Anthracoceros malayanus*, male;  
 bottom left, Bushy-crested Hornbill  
*Anorrhinus galeritus*.



Close-up  
with a Bornean  
Pygmy Elephant  
*Elephas maximus  
borneensis*.





The Dog-tooth Cat snake ■  
*Boiga cynodon*  
is a large and arboreal  
rear-fanged species  
which can be  
very aggressive  
if harassed.



Far left, wild figs;  
center, Pied Hornbill  
*Anthracoceros coronatus*;  
right, a strangling fig  
by the flooded shores  
of the Menanggol.

*The Kinabatangan is a haven for the gigantic - and extremely dangerous - Estuarine crocodile*



Large Estuarine crocodiles *Crocodylus porosus* offer a truly imposing sight. This species is responsible of several human deaths every year.



■ Left, a large adult male *Pongo pygmaeus* watches us from the forest canopy as it feeds on ripe wild figs. Right, a stunning pair of *Rhyticeros corrugatus*.



The quizzical, penetrating gaze of an adult male Proboscis monkey *Nasalis larvatus*. This is a highly dimorphic species, with the mature males characterized by a huge nasal appendage. The Kinabatangan river basin is one of the best areas in the world to watch this fascinating species in the wild.





■ *Proboscis monkey Nasalis larvatus are exceedingly wary of Estuarine crocodiles lurking in wait, and will avoid swimming at all costs if possible, much preferring to jump across small rivers, often covering considerable spans. Notice the baby holding tight to the mother's chest as she launches into a spectacular jump from the treetops high up in the forest canopy.*





*Dazzling plumage and  
outlandish beaks for  
the kingfishers of Borneo*




The beautiful Stork-billed Kingfisher *Pelargopsis capensis* can be easily seen by the river shores as it scans the water surface beneath for its fish prey.



■ Left, small boats from the tourist lodges start navigating the mist-shrouded Menanggol at dawn. Right, the Oriental Darter *Anhinga melanogaster*, a fish-eating and very skittish species which is not easily approached - notice the strongly webbed feet.





Half-hidden by the thick riverine vegetation, a rope bridge installed to aid Proboscis monkeys in crossing the slow-flowing Menanggol can be faintly glimpsed in the background.



A highly unusual and lucky encounter with an adult male Smooth Otter *Lutra (Lutrogale) perspicillata*.

Also featured on this  issue's cover, the stunningly beautiful Mangrove snake *Boiga dendrophila* is a glossy black and bright yellow rear-fanged snake which is regularly sighted among the vegetation overhanging the slow-moving tributaries of the Kinabatangan. Notice the encroaching oil palm plantation in the background, beyond the Wildlife Sanctuary's boundary.



## At-a-glance travel guide

COUNTRY OF DESTINATION: MALAYSIAN BORNEO



### USEFUL TIPS FOR YOUR EXPEDITION

Some simple, common sense, field-tested advice and information to make the best out of your trip and avoid hassles, worries and problems

**ROUTE:** You will probably arrive in Kota Kinabalu - Sabah's capital city - with a flight originating from Kuala Lumpur or Singapore. From KK it's a short 45 mins domestic connecting flight to Sandakan, the coastal town on the Sulu Sea where you'll be spending one or two nights to recuperate before moving on - by car or boat - to the Kinabatangan. Once in Sandakan you might also want to stay longer and visit the Sepilok-Kabili Forest Reserve, which hosts an Orangutan Rehabilitation program.

**MEANS OF TRANSPORT:** The Kinabatangan is reached by private car or by river launch and is mostly explored by river boat, with a few occasional

short forest walks thrown in (especially at night). All riverside lodges in Sukau offer boat trips (in groups), but if you are serious about your photography rent your own river boat with a private guide and an experienced boatman - it really does make a difference. For all bookings we can safely recommend our friend and professional photographer **Cede Prudente's** company **North Borneo Safari**, the most reliable and experienced wildlife tour operator in town.

**CURRENCY:** Malaysian Ringgit, but USD and Euros are widely accepted by most tour operators in Sandakan and by most riverside lodges.

**ACCOMODATION:** The Kinabatangan river basin offers a large number of basic, no-frills campsites and several more expensive lodges, both in Sukau and in Abai. Lodges proper are usually very comfortable, spotlessly clean and just by the river's edge. We can safely suggest the lovely and very comfortable **Bukit Melapi/Proboscis Lodge**, where we usually stay when we visit the area.

**FOOD:** Malaysians - and Sabahans in particular - love to eat! You'll have lots of fresh vegetables, great tropical fruit, tasty fish soups, plenty of squid and prawns (try the local river variety - you'll also support the local economy) and lots of steamed/grilled fresh

## *The lifelong dream of all wildlife photography lovers come true*



seafood. Food is perfectly safe (and not too spicy, if you're squeamish about that aspect - we aren't!).

**LANGUAGE:** Bahasa Malaysia and English, which is perfectly spoken in all lodges and by all guides.

**WORRIES:** None whatsoever. Borneo has a romantic film-image of steaming, forbidden jungles and savage head-hunters, but in fact the Malaysian states of Sarawak and Sabah (which are part of the island of Borneo together with the Sultanate of Brunei and the Indonesian region of Kalimantan) are well-developed (some might say too much) and well-organized. Crime is almost non-existent, food is wonderful and tourism is very well cared for. Once in a few years there are spats of spasmodic violence (mostly kidnappings) in the coastal islands by pirates from the Sulu Sea, but these occurrences are rare and there are Army detachments to stand guard.

**HEALTH:** We have been visiting regularly Borneo for the past twenty years - sometimes twice a year! - and we haven't been sick once, despite having been all over the place and having been bitten by scores of mosquitoes. Leeches - in case you worry - are perfectly harmless and do not transmit any dangerous tropical disease. Just be careful with the sun (one can get easily sunstroke if going on long boat trips without a hat) and follow the usual precautions regarding street food and drink. Water served in the lodges is usually perfectly safe to drink.

**CLIMATE:** Equatorial lowland coastal forest - very humid, occasionally extremely hot, with frequent torrential downpours and extensive flooding during the rainy season from November to March. Nothing to worry about anyway, as you won't be doing too much walking in the forest - river trips in the early morning or at night can even be surprisingly cool.

**BESIDES:** Sabah has much to offer to the adventurous traveler and the wildlife enthusiast - we usually suggest to pick a destination and stick to it for at least a couple of weeks, but if you want to squeeze the most out of your stay (and your international flight) you might want to visit several other National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries - such as the demanding and exhilarating Mount Kinabalu (near Kota Kinabalu), the pristine and remote Danum Valley (see our feature on issue 1 of *ANIMA MUNDI*) or Tabin Forest Reserve. Opportunities for wildlife photography enthusiasts are endless! Sabah also boasts some stunning seaside locations - one can indulge in world-class scuba diving at Pulau Sipadan, Pulau Mabul or Layang Layang atoll, or opt to relax by the beach on private, exclusive islands such as [Pulau Lankayan](#) or [Pulau Mantanani](#). Whatever your decisions will be, you won't be disappointed - this we can guarantee! ●