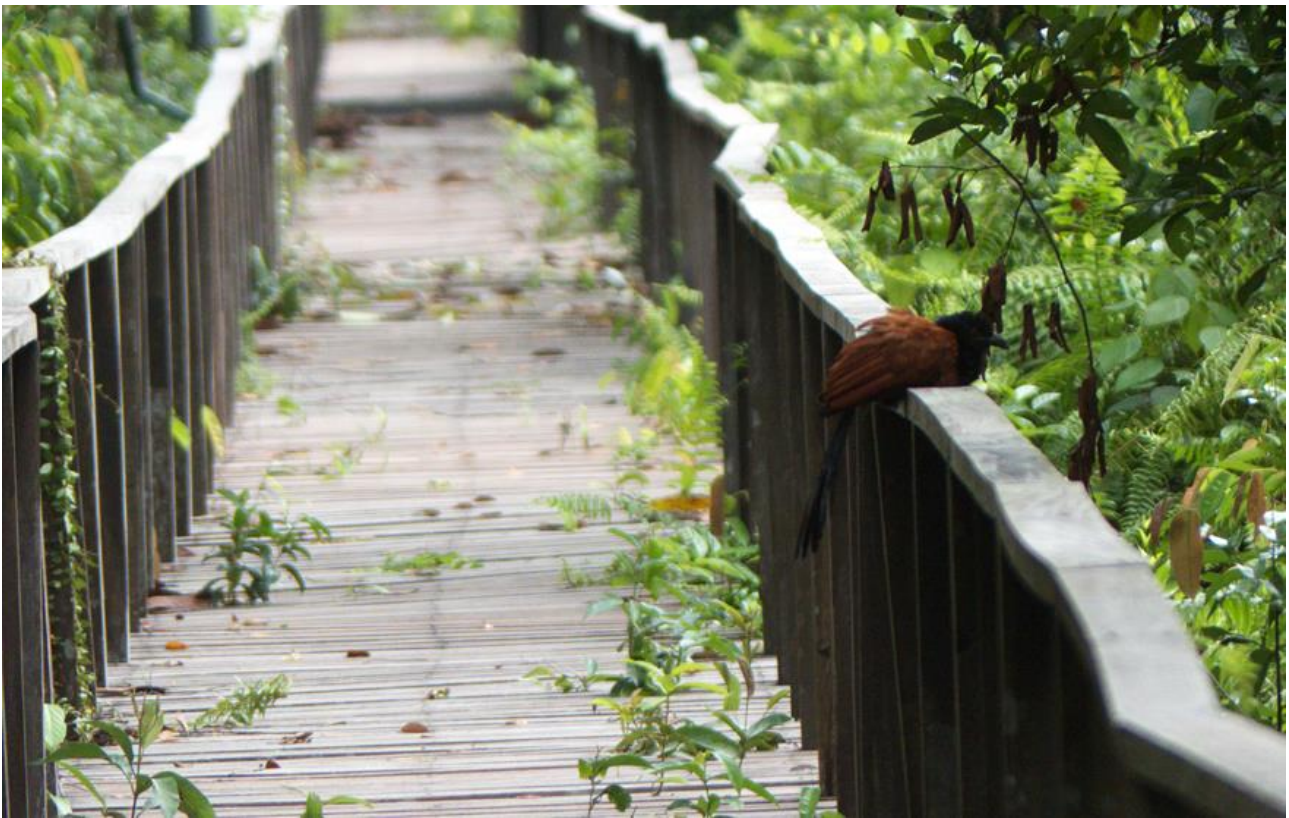




## BIRD TOURISM REPORTS 5/2017

Petri Hottola

# KLIAS PEAT SWAMP & KUALA PENYU



**Fig. 1.** The Klias Peat Swamp Reserve boardwalk, with an ornamental bird as a decoration...

On the 24<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup> July, 2016, I visited the Klias Peat Swamp Reserve, Sabah, and the Kuala Penyu area twice, during a more extensive journey in the northern part of Borneo, my second visit in the region. As I already had the majority of region's birds on my world list, the focus was on the remaining ones, and on sites not yet visited because of shortage of time or lack of information. The trip was organized and completed solo, traveling by a rented Proton Saga, which is a quite feasible way to bird Sabah and Sarawak, with their adequate even though at times challenging service infrastructure.

For the Klias – Kuala Penyu area, my main target species were **Christmas Island Frigatebird**, **Grey Imperial Pigeon**, **Grey-breasted Babbler**, **Hook-billed Bulbul** and **Brown-backed Flowerpecker**. All

of them were eventually found, even though the second and last one at a different location (more below).

At other sites of the journey, I was looking for **Red-legged Crake, Oriental Bay Owl, Ferruginous Partridge, Dulit and Bornean Frogmouth, Dusky and Hose's Broadbill, Garnet, Blue-banded and Bornean Banded Pitta, Rufous-tailed Jungle Flycatcher, Bornean Forktail, Bornean Blue Flycatcher, Black-throated and Striped Wren-babbler, White-necked Babbler and Yellow-rumped Flowerpecker** (many seen; an incredible miss on the previous, comprehensive visit in Sabah). In addition, there were a few very unlikely even though theoretically possible species such as **Bornean Peacock Pheasant, Bonaparte's Nightjar, Black Oriole and Spectacled Flowerpecker**. Out of the 17 main list species, I found 14, missing the **Bornean Frogmouth, Garnet Pitta and White-necked Babbler**.

The Bakelalan part of the journey will be presented in a separate report. The other sites are so well-covered in recent reports that there currently is no need for another one. What is more, writing some fifteen trip reports per year, as a voluntary community effort, is a significant workload and one consequently has to set some limits. In this report, the focus is going to be on the Klias – Kuala Penyu area, with an emphasis on species recorded there and on the meager information on birding sites I managed to gather during the three days. Not familiar with the local conditions, I made some mistakes in the field arrangements, especially in regard to accommodation and access. The following text has also been written to help others to avoid repeating the mistakes.

## CAR RENTAL

Renting a car in Sabah is difficult because of the common problems with tourism services there: The companies are difficult to contact and it is often not easy to find out the details of the rental, including the price. For some reason, Internet information on Sabah is, as a rule, rather incomplete. The idea of providing the service has been there, but somehow, the projects tend to remain unfinished. One has to be in contact by email, and ask all the open questions beforehand. Even then, surprises may occur.

I booked my car with Europcar Kota Kinabalu Airport, but rented it at Borneo Express Rent-a-car, their neighbor. Why? Because Europcar Sabah does not allow its cars to be driven across the state border to Sarawak, not even to the close-by Lawas. Borneo Express, their recommendation for me, did not have such restrictions because they had a partner in Lawas. They also had a Proton Saga available for me. Once again, a van was almost forced on me but I remained adamant, being definitely not into driving an 8-seater with a number of shortcomings, including lack of trunk, to start with! A Proton Saga is a sound choice, and served me well. I wish the Sabah car renters some day started to realize that very few foreign customers travel as an extended family...

Borneo Express also agreed to accept the same rate and contract that I had with Europcar. The nice lady at the Europcar office helped me. Overall, it nevertheless was a major, stressful late afternoon delay during which I was demanded a cash deposit of USD 300 + MYR 22 and a Visa deposit. The USD notes were photocopied in case of forgery (I had to sign the copies). A number of other irritating details followed, such as the fact that there would not be enough gas in the tank to reach Mt. Kinabalu, my first stop. They made one mistake which I noticed but decided to not comment on to save time: the credit card deposit was ten times too small. In the end, the sun had gone down, heavy rain started and I had to drive through the city, on an unknown route with some serious road construction, during the rush hour, and fill the tank at a gas station to start with. As a result, I would be late for my accommodation and might even lose it.

At a start not too unfamiliar in Kota Kinabalu, I know. When returning the car, I made sure that there definitely was no extra gasoline in the tank. On the contrary... The error with the Visa payment was corrected and I told them that I had noticed it earlier, but had kept my mouth shut in order to not delay myself any more. I also carefully checked the returned USD 300 notes, one by one, telling them that I wanted to be sure that not a single one of them had been changed to a forged one! The manager seemed to enjoy my comments, giving his respects to a mutually rough handling of a rental partner.

During the days following the pick up on the 19<sup>th</sup> of July, I visited Poring Hot Springs, Sepilok and Mt. Kinabalu (very shortly), before driving down to Lawas, with a reconnaissance stop at Klias Peat Swamp. After two days in Bakelalan, I drove to the border of Brunei and back to Lawas, and visited the Klias – Kuala Penyu area twice before returning to Kuala Lumpur. There were no real problems with traffic or the car; minor things needed to be fixed, the engine had slight complications at high altitudes, during cold early hours, and the air-conditioning made noise for a day in Sepilok. The roads were fine, albeit periodically blocked by palm oil trucks towards Sandakan.

On the day I drove to Lawas, 24<sup>th</sup> of July, I started at Mt. Kinabalu, driving a total of 300 kms. The Pan-Borneo Highway project, a two to four-lane highway connecting Sarawak, Brunei and Sabah, has apparently been postponed because Sabah has not been able to do its part of the project. The highway ends soon, south of Kota Kinabalu. From the border of Sarawak, a new wide road runs to Lawas. After practice, I could drive the 34 km from the Sabah/Sarawak border to Lawas in 28 minutes. There was one rough section on the way. If the border is open, the driving time between Kuala Lumpur International Airport and Lawas is around three hours, depending on weather. Driving in, I spent half of the time in such a heavy downpour that it at times stopped the traffic on the highway, for a short while.

The border between the two states of Malaysia is a Monty Python style monument of red tape. Make no mistake, your tourist visa to Malaysia becomes void as soon as you enter Sabah or Sarawak. You apply for a new one at the border, and as a rule receive one. On the border between the two states the demarcation is stricter than between most independent nations. On each

crossing, you receive a new visa, in my case six ones, and you have to be there before 24.00 or after 06.00. The border is closed for six hours every night, despite the fact that this is the one and only land route to Brunei, and between the states. The effects can only be imagined, both in terms of economy and national cohesion. Imagine the border between the states of New York and New Jersey being closed at night, and visas being issued at the border, each way...

## ACCOMMODATION

During this part of my journey, I stayed in two hotels. My other accommodations in Borneo were: **D’Villa Rina Ria Lodge** (Gunung Kinabalu), **Slagon Homestay** (Ranau), **Sepilok B&B** (Sepilok) and **Sang and Julia’s Homestay** (Bakelalan).

**Hotel Seri Malaysia Lawas** (MYR 240, €52 (Agoda Price, with breakfast): About four stars, and with a friendly and professional staff. The room was peaceful, clean and comfortable, and had a television set with a number of international channels. There was plenty of parking space. Breakfasts and other meals were served in a restaurant, buffet style or *à la carte*. As usual in Malaysian Borneo, the breakfast had no specific breakfast items but resembled a lunch. Overall, the hotel was a nice place to stay, especially if compared to some other choices across the state border, in Sabah.

The hotel was chosen as a convenient place to stay close to the small Lawas Airport. I left my things and car there while visiting Bakelalan by air (see a separate report) and used the hotel as my base for the Klias – Kuala Penyu area afterwards. Not aware that the border between Sabah and Sarawak was like a border between independent nations, I thought Lawas to be a reasonably practical choice, especially because no accommodation could be located in Beaufort, next to Klias, at Agoda.com and at Booking.com. The Beaufort hotels which had an Internet homepage, did not bother to reply to emails from Finland. My recommendation is: go to Beaufort and visit the hotels in person. They appeared to be more than half empty...

The Hotel Seri Malaysia shop had Coke Zero for MYR 2 (€0.42) per can, a reasonable price for a four-star hotel. The drink had been cheapest – surprise, surprise – at Kuala Lumpur International Airport, just MYR 1 (€0.21) per a can. In Kota Kinabalu and Ranau, the price was MYR 1.50 (€0.32), and in Bakelalan MYR 6 (€1.30). In one shop in West Sumatra, it was €4 per can (Coke Light, the same drink under a different brand name), the price of 20 cans in Kuala Lumpur! In Sandakan – Sepilok and in Beaufort, sugar-free soft drinks were not available at all. Lawas has some shops for groceries, but their product assortment is fairly limited. Yes, I make wide-ranging price comparisons to get an idea where to stock up, when on the road.

**Casuarina Hotel**, Kota Kinabalu (MYR 220, €50 (Agoda price, with ‘breakfast’ and airport shuttle): Before leaving Malaysia, for the Philippines, I had planned to rest well and enjoy the comforts of this hotel at Tanjung Aru, close to the Kota Kinabalu International Airport. Unfortunately, as also a

number of other Internet reviews witness, the hotel is currently poorly managed and apparently on its way to bankruptcy, despite the unbeatable location (both for transits and birds) and the well-designed building.

After the door of my first room could not be locked (a broken lock), I made a complaint at the reception. The lady of the house, always helpful, offered a solution. I checked out four rooms to stay in the least problematic of them. In the chosen one, it was not possible to flush the toilet, unless one put one's hand deep in the water tank to pull the flush valve up. Then, one had to find a way to close it. This was not a very pleasant task, as the tank was not clean. The television of the damp room had only four channels, in Malaysian and Chinese. Somebody smoked cigarettes when cleaning the rooms, also in the non-smoking areas, to mention another detail on a long list of negligent housekeeping.

Their 'American breakfast' was an interesting, even though tasteless one. In the second morning, I requested the 'American baked beans' and sausages to be left out, to be on a safe side, and focused on toast, jam and eggs. Otherwise, there was no food and it was also forbidden to bring in mangosteens, as an example. I nevertheless feasted on my tropical fruits in the peace of my room, making sure to not stain anything. The Tanjung Aru eateries were unfortunately not very hygienic. I saw a few daytime rats there, a proof that rat urine would be all over the place, including food. The close-by Table No. 1 restaurant opens only very late in the evening and is expensive. Fortunately, Perdana Park had some fresh food for a good price, a take away place run by a Taiwanese family in particular. Well, at least the airport shuttle of Casuarina Hotel worked well!

Tanjung Aru is well known for its (feral) population of **Blue-naped Parrots**, which are readily seen around the Casuarina Hotel. In early mornings and late afternoons, I did some scanning of the treetops, where many common birds such as **Green Imperial Pigeons** congregated. A third floor balcony proved to be ideal for that. On the 30<sup>th</sup> July, I got lucky, when a **Grey Imperial Pigeon** appeared at the site. The somewhat nomadic species may be seen at the close-by protected islands (Tunku Abdul Rahman Park), from where occasional visits to the coast are made.



**Fig. 2.** An overcast, rainy day at Tanjung Aru. A **Blue-naped Parrot** observes the hotel area.

## SITES AND THEIR BIRDS

The following site descriptions include all the birds species recorded there, with some detailed information on the key species.

Additionally, a few birds were seen on the 27<sup>th</sup> of July, when an afternoon drive from Lawas to Brunei border was made, on the 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup>, on my way from Lawas to Klias and Kuala Penyu and back, and finally, on the way to Kota Kinabalu, via these areas. On the 29<sup>th</sup>, I went to Kampongs Lukut, Suasa and Gadong in Klias, to Menumbok (Labuan views) and to Binsuluk, via some coastal mangroves (Membakut). Around the first villages, for example two **Dusky Broadbills** and a **Banded Bay Cuckoo** were recorded. At Kampong Kerukan, a few kilos of fresh and ripe mangosteens, rambutans and finger bananas were purchased by the road. Be sure to not miss the local fruit when in Southeast Asia!

On the way to Brunei, the best bird was an adult **Purple Heron**, otherwise not recorded during the visit. I could not locate any good sites for **Garnet Pittas**, which occur south of Lawas River, an important distributional barrier for several bird species. A group of four **Bornean Bristleheads** were nevertheless seen, crossing the highway. On the 28<sup>th</sup>, a happy party of 250 **Pacific Swallows** were gorging themselves on termites at the closed Sabah/Sarawak border, before sunrise, the termites being apparently attracted there by our car lights (several cars were waiting at the border). On the next morning, two **Wrinkled Hornbills** crossed the highway on the Sarawak side, at sunrise. Many common birds were seen while driving the roads of Borneo.

The mammal list for the following sites was a short one. About 14 **Long-tailed (Crab-eating) Macaques** were seen at the Klias Reserve and around it, and a single one at Kuala Penyu.

### **Klias Peatland Reserve (5.325720, 115.673080)**

The reserve was visited on the 24<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> July, late in the afternoon and early in the morning, respectively. During the afternoon visit, a gathering of some 350 people was present at the headquarters, with speeches and ear-shattering live music. Parking was a bit difficult, with five buses and several dozen other vehicles occupying the meager space. During the morning visit, the place was deserted. I did not see anybody on arrival. On neither occasion, the man in charge was easy to locate. He collected a MYR 15 (€3.20) entrance fee, but the visit was not registered and I did not receive a receipt.

There is a wide wooden boardwalk of a lasso shape. Walk through in-between the buildings (signposted). Initially, one walks a distance in a straight lane, after a right-hand turn in the very beginning. Most of the birds can be located around the one and only Y-junction, where a large shelter has been erected. Personally, I explored both the left and right hand directions of the junction, but never walked a full circle.



There were a few fallen trees and branches on the boardwalk, here and there, and a few million ants, which I tried not to step on, even though I am not a follower of Jainism.... In the case of rain showers, it is important to have a shelter close by. During the afternoon visit, I got drenched on my walk back to the car.

On the first visit, I also made a mistake by entering the site on the gravel Jalan Padas Valley, which also had mud around a construction site in the beginning. Only later on, I discovered that the final tarmac track to the headquarters comes from Jalan Luagan (the reserve is signposted there), with access to Beaufort and A2, the Pan-Borneo Highway to Kuala Lumpur (see Google Maps).

Food could be bought at Beaufort. They even had a well signposted Pizza Hut, in a next to empty new commercial center, short distance away from the center. The pizzas were expensive and missed some essential spices, Pizza Hut style, but the one I bought was at least fresh and filling. Some shops along the way had snacks, water and soft drinks, albeit no sugar-free choices (available in Kota Kinabalu and around Mt. Kinabalu). Fortunately, there was oregano for the pizza.

In regard to key target species, I found both of them difficult to spot. The **Grey-breasted Babbler** was observed only on the first visit. It responded to a mp3 file, along the left hand route after the Y-fork. The next morning, the loudspeaker of my mp3 player died, after a few years of impeccable service, a proud record for a €6 Chinese device. **Hook-billed Babblers**, on the other hand, were only seen during the second, morning visit. I saw them several times along the right hand fork, soon after the Y, but they were busy fellows, constantly moving around the area.

For those who regret not seeing a **Red-chested Flowerpecker** at the Klias Reserve: Why not look for them at Sepilok? I have seen them there on both of my visits, without problems. On the access road to the Sepilok Orangutan Centre, between its gate and the junction of Rainforest Discovery Centre (RDC), there are a few low trees in an open spot by the road. The trees are favored by flowerpeckers. For example on 23<sup>rd</sup> July, there were three **Red-chested Flowerpeckers** there. Likewise, I did not need to specifically look for **Brown-backed Flowerpecker** at Klias, after seeing one at the RDC Main Pond, on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, too. The latter species is, however, rare in Sepilok.

### **Bird list:**

<b>Crested Serpent Eagle</b>	1
<b>White-breasted Water Hen</b>	10
<b>Green Imperial Pigeon</b>	1
<b>Spotted Dove</b>	+
<b>Long-tailed Parakeet</b>	1
<b>Blue-crowned Hanging Parrot</b>	1
<b>Greater Coucal</b>	6
<b>Short-toed Coucal</b>	2, Padas Valley Road.
<b>Plaintive Cuckoo</b>	2

Asian Koel	1
Raffles's Malkoha	20
Chestnut-bellied Malkoha	1
Chestnut-breasted Malkoha	1
Buff-rumped Woodpecker	3
Golden-whiskered Barbet	2
Blue-eared Barbet	3
Stork-billed Kingfisher	1
Collared Kingfisher	2
Oriental Dollarbird	3, along the access road.
Whiskered Treeswift	2
Black-nest/Mossy-nest Swiftlet	10
Bar-bellied Cuckooshrike	2
Lesser Green Leafbird	1
Green Iora	6
Black-winged Flycatcher Shrike	2
Grey-breasted Babbler	1, on the left, after the Y-fork.
Short-tailed Babbler	1, at the Y-fork.
Chestnut-winged Babbler	1, at the Y-fork.
Abbott's Babbler	3, at the beginning of the boardwalk.
Greater Racket-tailed Drongo	2
Yellow-vented Bulbul	50
Olive-winged Bulbul	10
Cream-vented Bulbul	10
Puff-backed Bulbul	1
Hook-billed Bulbul	4, on the right, after the Y-fork.
Ashy Tailorbird	2
Rufous-tailed Tailorbird	10
Malaysian Pied Fantail	2
Crimson Sunbird	4
Yellow-rumped Flowerpecker	2, one pair.
Orange-bellied Flowerpecker	5
Scarlet-backed Flowerpecker	1
Dark-throated Oriole	1
White-breasted Wood Swallow	+
Asian Glossy Starling	+
Common Hill Myna	5

## **Kuala Penyu (5.623940, 115.610785)**

The main reason for visiting the peninsula was its close proximity to the island of Pulau Tiga. A small islet to the east of the island is a well known roosting place of many frigatebirds, including **Christmas Island Frigatebird**. What is more, **Grey Imperial Pigeons** do occur at Pulau Tiga and may periodically visit the coastal mainland from there. I was hoping for a late afternoon roost flight, but it never occurred. The movements of the imperial pigeons may be seasonal.



A good and peaceful vantage point was discovered in front of a private house, at the site of the coordinates. There was space for a car there and I had only some dogs as company there. Other visitors to the area went further on, to the pier. Unfortunately, most of the frigatebirds were too far away for reliable identification. I was lucky that the only one which passed close-by happened to be a **Christmas Island Frigatebird**. The terns were, however, close to the shore.

In the larger area, I also birded the vast marshland along the Beaufort Road, the 'Beaufort Road Marsh' (5.479602, 115.568453). It is not in natural state anymore but nevertheless attracts many marshland species, including a **Red-legged Crake**. From the village of Kuala Penyu to Membakut, a mangrove estuary at 5.538855, 115.662352 had at least one adult **Chinese Egret** and a **Pacific Reef Egret**. I also visited Menumbok, scoping at a public park at the tip of the peninsula (5.295709, 115.347458). A tired **Chinese Sparrowhawk**, apparently a fresh arrival, rested on an islet off the shore, and the site had great views of Labuan, but a local man with a forged USD 1.000 note and an equally fake story disturbed me too much there, forcing an early leave.

### Bird list:

<b>Christmas Island Frigatebird</b>	1 4 <sup>th</sup> calendar year female.
<b>Frigatebird sp</b>	100+, too far away, beyond Pulau Tiga.
<b>Great Egret</b>	20+, at Beaufort road marshland.
<b>Intermediate Egret</b>	100+, at Beaufort road marshland.
<b>Chinese Egret</b>	1 adult, at Membakut mangroves.
<b>Pacific Reef Egret</b>	1, at Membakut mangroves.
<b>Eastern Cattle Egret</b>	250+, at Beaufort road marshland.
<b>Brahminy Kite</b>	1, at Beaufort road marshland.
<b>Black-winged Kite</b>	3, at Beaufort road marshland.
<b>White-bellied Sea Eagle</b>	2, one adult and one subadult bird.
<b>Chinese Sparrowhawk</b>	1, at Menumbok, a recently arrived migrant at the shore.
<b>Red-legged Crake</b>	1, at Beaufort road marshland.
<b>Bridled Tern</b>	100+
<b>Lesser Crested Tern</b>	3
<b>Black-naped Tern</b>	100+
<b>Little Tern</b>	2, one pair. An interesting record. Breeding?
<b>Pink-necked Green Pigeon</b>	3
<b>Spotted Dove</b>	+
<b>Collared Kingfisher</b>	6
<b>Asian Koel</b>	1, at Menumbok.
<b>Asian Palm Swift</b>	5
<b>Barn Swallow</b>	50+, at Beaufort road marshland.
<b>Pacific Swallow</b>	50+
<b>Yellow-vented Bulbul</b>	+
<b>White-breasted Wood Swallow</b>	+
<b>Asian Glossy Starling</b>	+
<b>Eurasian Tree Sparrow</b>	10
<b>Chestnut Munia</b>	30
<b>Dusky Munia</b>	4

## IN RETROSPECT

As already brought out, Lawas may have a nice hotel for a stay, but staying there is a good idea only in connection with a visit to Bakelalan (and/or to Paya Maga). For the Klias Reserve and Kuala Penyu area, it is probably best to stay in Beaufort, even though I have no first-hand experience of any of the hotels in the town and am therefore not really able to recommend them. Let's hope it will be possible to make Internet bookings there in the future.

Overall, Sabah and Sarawak have many sites which are suitable for birdwatching, too many to be covered on one or two visits. Some are very expensive and reserved only for tour groups (e.g. Danum Valley), some are open for anybody. Some are easy to visit, some require more effort. Most of the area receives little attention from birdwatchers. Personally, I have only visited the easy, touristy sites so far, but have nevertheless managed to locate most of the bird species in Borneo. The island is well covered by bird guidebooks and there are plenty of bird songs and calls available, notably at [xeno-canto.org](http://xeno-canto.org). Borneo is a rewarding destination, even though not without its challenges, and therefore recommended for anybody interested in the South-east Asian birdlife.

**Good luck with your visit in Klias Peat Swamp and Kuala Penyu!**



**Fig. 3.** A relaxed *bubutus* **Great Coucal** at the Klias Peat Swamp boardwalk. It stayed at its vantage point as I said good bye and left the place.