



BIRD TOURISM REPORTS 2/2017

Petri Hottola

TAPAN RD & GUNUNG KERINCI, SUMATRA



Fig. 1. The only photo I took in West Sumatra: the license of my taxi driver, on our way from Padang to Sungai Penuh. In some destinations, the daily struggles do not leave time for photos.

12th to 17th July, 2016, I was able to visit West Sumatra for five days. The visit was a part of an eight week private RTW birding tour and my last stop in Indonesia, before moving ahead to Malaysia. Sumatra had been on my list for a long time, despite the difficulty of obtaining information which would enable going there solo. In 2016, it was finally time to do the first, preliminary visit. The region of West Sumatra, close to Gunung Kerinci, appeared to be a perfect introduction to the island. It had many Sumatran endemics, in an area with rudimentary tourism services and less than average security risks. The gateway, Padang, was well connected with other regional airline hubs, e.g. with Garuda Indonesia (the best choice) flights from Jakarta.

In the Internet, there are trip reports which offer some valuable information on a number of birding sites in Indonesia. Burung-nusantara.org is also a very good source of basic knowledge. In regard to West Sumatra, there is plenty of practical information at wildsumatra.com. If looking for a guided tour, Wild Sumatra Tours probably is the best partner for organizing one. In my case, the fact that I had no desire to be guided made cooperation impossible, despite the several emails we exchanged. Guiding appears to be the core of their activities, their main source of income.

For me, however, it is valuable to be able to 'hunt' the birds alone, in silence and completely engaged, and to spot them by oneself. To me, following the guide who shows the bird is an antithesis of birdwatching, like visiting a zoo, with its lack of individual exploration. I guess it is also about being in control, being able to focus on things of personal interest, rather than to follow somebody else's interests, however enlightening that also may occasionally be. The following report has been written with the independent birding globetrotters in mind, as the primary target audience. Some of us may hire guides, some of us may not, but we nevertheless tend to negotiate directly with the local service providers.

The islands of Indonesia may be great for their birdlife but otherwise I really cannot name any other nation as time-consuming to visit for birdwatching. The preparations need to be extensive, and still there will be a lot to be organized after one's arrival. To start with, there is no bird guidebook available for the nation. Information on tourism services is limited. The services are difficult to contact. Some essential services may be lacking or fall short of visitor requirements. The islands are culturally isolated, with oftentimes limited understanding of the rest of the world, or the visitors who arrive from other cultures. The local customs may also affect the lives of the visitors in unexpected ways.

Well, no nation is perfect from the viewpoint of tourism. Nevertheless, Indonesia remains more a challenge for a European than most other destinations. For example Malaysia, in many ways similar to Indonesia, is significantly more easygoing than its populous neighbor. It also has the guidebooks and services which enable more freedom of choice.

Especially during the period of Ramadan, the overwhelming presence of Muslim traditions in Indonesia, currently alarmingly mixed with political jihadism, may create an environment not completely welcoming for a foreign visitor. In Sumatra, there probably are more mosques than anywhere else in the world, several times more than in the Middle East, and new ones keep on being constructed with funding from the Sunni states of the Persian Gulf.

What is more, and again somewhat unlike in the more serene Middle East, these mosques are very loud in their prayer calls, competing with their neighbors in the volume of their loudspeaker systems. Interestingly, the calls may not be performed by the Indonesians themselves but recordings from the Gulf have been adopted to guarantee the absolutely correct pronunciation of the Arabic language. The Quran needs to be followed to the letter.

I do not know how many thousands of times I heard *Allahu akhbar* during the few days in Sumatra. The counting becomes difficult if the car radio is also open. The radio broadcasts prayers, too. And the current popular music is essentially also about singing the verses of Quran, with *Allahu akhbar* as the common key phrase. You get the picture... Personally, I believe the message would remain more meaningful if it was not repeated quite so often. On the other hand, hammering it to the minds of the people may also work in the long run. Depends on the quality of adoption one is looking for, I guess.

TRANSPORTATION

Organizing transportation is the main problem in this part of Sumatra. The distances may not be large, but the going is slow, and a drive which in Europe would take two hours may take a full day there. Furthermore, negotiations on fees may prove to be tough, both beforehand and after arrival. No professional services with set and reliable prices and policies such as international car rental chains exist in West Sumatra.

Several trip reports refer to Mr. Pak Subandi, the Kersik Tuo bird guide and homestay operator, and tell that he is the man who can organize anything. In my case, he unfortunately was not. After an initial reply to my email, in which he wrote that he could pick me up in Padang and organize the visit, there was silence. I tried to negotiate the details, including the location and the time of the pick-up, and asked about the price of his services, but there was no response. At some point, I thought that something bad had happened to the man. Eventually, Wild Sumatra Tours was able to contact him, confirming that he was alive and well, but for some reason remained evasive, leaving me on my own in Sumatra.

In the end, the endless hours of trying to make the field arrangement negatively affected the whole RTW tour, because I did not have enough preparation time for other destinations on the route, as a result of spending so much of the resource on Sumatra, without result.

In practice, I booked my first night's accommodation in the Internet and had to leave the rest for the field, on the expense of secondary field activities such as photography. However, after my Garuda Indonesia arrival in Padang, 20 minutes early, I had to contact tourist information at the airport, because my preordered hotel shuttle was not there. The young ladies at the counter were helpful and told me to wait in front of their counter, where a group of heavily armed soldiers had gathered to protect the airport. The soldiers pointed me to sit on a low podium, on a grandiose chair apparently reserved for high ranking officers and officials.

(Diet Coke cost IDR 58.000 (€4) per can at the airport. Pretty expensive, especially if compared with a Kuala Lumpur airport price of €0.20).

Padang to Sungai Penuh

As time went on, and my ill feelings towards Premier Basko Hotel matured, I decided to try to hire a ride to Sungai Penuh at the airport. The town of Sungai Penuh is the base for both Tapan Road and Gunung Kerinci. I walked to the taxi counter, being followed by the above-mentioned young and pretty ladies, and explained the situation. Most of the drivers were not interested in leaving Padang, but there was one man who could do it, if the price was right. The correct rate for the drive was IDR 750.000 (€52), one way from Padang, but our negotiations, me and the ladies against the driver and the spokesman of the taxi drivers, ended up at IDR 875.000, and a promise of an IDR 25.000 'tip', if everything went well. In other words, IDR 900.000 (€63), 150.000 (€11) more than the going rate.

Ahmad Ramli, the driver, was 15 minutes late in the next morning but was a jovial man and did his part of the deal very well. At each pot hole, and there were many, an 'ow-ow' could be heard. Little by little, it dawned to me that this was also his way to visit some relatives in Sungai Penuh. Towards the town, we picked three small girls in the car, one of whom was eager to practice her English with me. The drive took seven hours, partly because of frequent toilet stops. The local toilets may be a challenge for tall Westerners, as there are only squat ones available.

Sungai Penuh to Tapan Road and Mt. Kerinci Summit Trail, and Kersik Tuo to Padang

In Sungai Penuh, I made a deal with Afrim, a guide friend of the Hotel Kerinci manager, who had a rather beat up (no safety belts etc.) but functional van and listened to my requests, arriving early each morning. He also organized my ride back to Padang, for which a new and fast car was needed, with a young driver, called Ipan. All in all, I paid IDR 2.000 000 (€140) for two trips to Tapan Road and back, a transit to Kersik Tuo, two trips to Mt. Kerinci trailhead and back, and the return drive to Padang. As could have been anticipated, the local rates were more economical than the ones a Padang operator or Mr. Subandi could have offered (cf. Wildsumatra.com). On top of the transportation costs, I had to pay IDR 150.000 (€11) for a morning entrance to the Mt. Kerinci National Park. This was organized by Mr. Subandi. Yes, I met him at Kersik Tuo...

The 199 km return drive to Padang cost IDR 500.000 (€35) and took six hours. I had no meals on the way, to the surprise of my driver, but what else could I do, as there was no fresh food at roadside stalls. The precooked meat may stand there for a day, or more, before being served, unlike for example in Thailand, where meals are usually cooked after an order, with fresh ingredients.

In Padang, a taxi from Hotel Ibis to the airport cost only IDR 95.000 (€6.70), despite twice as long distance, if compared to Premir Basko (more below). The cultural sights along the taxi route included Masjid Jihad, one of the five in the city, conveniently close to the airport... At the airport, open doors allowed free movements between check in and security areas further inside the

building. One of the above-mentioned tourist information ladies arrived to greet me, to ask about my experiences at Sungai Penuh. She had spotted me in the long line of people outside the departure hall.

In Sungai Penuh, we had many discussions on local customs and Islam with Afrim, who also invited me to visit his home and his home village, where people were understandably curious of the Finnish visitor. A number of selfies were taken with me. I also tasted some Ramadan delicacies, such as biscuits, with tea. Living in a Muslim culture has never been a problem for me in terms of everyday customs such as public behavior and alcohol. As long as the locals remain respectful towards the visitors, like they are for example in Oman, I have had no real problems in adapting to the local way of life, in a role of a tourist.

ACCOMMODATION

Premier Basko, Padang (IDR 1.2 million, €85 (list rate)/IDR 500.000, €35 (my Agoda rate)/IDR 750.000, €53 (at the reception rate): The five star hotel has recently scored low in reviews and it showed. Premier Basko does not belong to the top hotels of the city anymore. I booked a room there because of a good Agoda rate and the fact that the hotel was close to the airport, and the room rate included a hotel shuttle.

In practice, it did not. There was nobody at the airport to meet me and the hotel had to be called. After a one hour wait in the humid climate, the shuttle arrived, but the hotel charged IDR 150.000 (€11) (IDR 100.000 more than a taxi) for the service, contrary to the confirmed booking. Pointing out the details of my booking did not correct the situation.

What was left of the comforts of the room was nice, though, after I got over the spotty sheets and pillowcases, not to mention the floors. The television had many international channels and the bed was really soft. Importantly, there was a large supermarket right by the hotel, with a great selection of groceries, including many Ramadan items from the Middle East, for example a special variety of dates from United Arab Emirates. Their packed breakfast, on the other hand, was rather disappointing, and an Agoda customer was openly despised at the reception. The hotel is at Kota Padang, along the Jalan Prof. Dr. Hamka, one of the main streets of the city.

Hotel Kerinci, Sungai Penuh (IDR 250.000, €17 with breakfast, in theory): According to Wildsumatra.com, Hotel Kerinci is the newest hotel of Sungai Penuh. It has a central location along Jalan Muradi, the main thoroughfare. Overall, the hotel was a fairly good place to stay, with some problems: First, the room had a bad sewer gas smell, because of problems in plumbing, perhaps a result of the place being practically empty. Second, the pillows were black with mold. Third, the promised take away breakfasts were never delivered, despite the fact that several idle men were present at the lobby early in the morning. In other words, I paid for breakfasts, but never had one.

Fourth, meals were not available at the hotel restaurant, not even snacks. The staff cooked food for themselves, but not for the customers.

The alternatives along the street were not very good, either. The fried chicken stalls followed the usual Sumatra formula: the pieces of chicken had been fried earlier and then left to simmer in the heat and dust, with flies. Overall, the level of hygiene was low. The same can be said about a restaurant further down the street, where I bought my take away meals, trying to pick fresh and hot items. The food was, however, handled with bare hands. On the plus side, the cashier was ready to give me an IDR 1.000 (€0.07!) reduction, because they did not have exact change. To his surprise, I gave the IDR 1.000 back the next day (cannot help the Lutheran ethics of my upbringing!).

There were few small shops on the street, too, where soft drinks, bottled water, bananas and biscuits could be bought, but the assortment was pretty limited. I survived on these meager pickings, but was not really happy with the food situation at Sungai Penuh, especially because the snacks invariably contained hydrogenated palm oil, glucose-fructose syrup and other low quality ingredients seriously harmful to one's health. Fortunately, not trusting the local services in the first place, I had brought some extras from Sulawesi and Padang, to supplement what was locally available.

On the other hand, the hotel was peaceful and there was a view to the fields from my floor. Moreover, the manager understood my transportation needs and had a contact, Afrim, who could reliably solve the problems, for an agreeable fee. Both of these men spoke good English and understood my needs.

The extensive rice fields of Sungai Penuh held a number of common, widespread species such as **Great Egret, Little Egret, Eastern Cattle Egret, Black-winged Kite, Spotted Dove, Glossy Swiftlet, Long-tailed Shrike, Yellow-vented Bulbul, Oriental Magpie Robin, Javan Myna and Eurasian Tree Sparrow**. On the way to the town, the best birds were an **Oriental Reed Warbler** and a **Sumatran Babbler**, the latter my only one of the trip. The roadside babbler was found along the lower reaches of Gunung Kerinci.

Pak Subandi guesthouse, Kersik Tuo (IDR 50.000, €4): Tiny rooms with an attached toilet and a water tank for washing. There were slight problems with noise, but overall it was a good deal in regard to rest. Small meals and snacks could be had any time of the day. The place was mostly occupied by an international assortment of holiday trekkers, with no specific interest in the area, except a motivation to walk to the Gunung Kerinci summit and back. Bird guide services were available and Gunung Kerinci entrance fees could be paid at the guesthouse, but one does not really need the guiding, unless one is looking for company or it is the first time in Southeast Asia. In fact, especially at the Gunung Kerinci trail, solo birding may well be more productive than going out with a guide. The birds are shy and easily disturbed.

Mr. Subandi must have noticed that I was the guy who had been emailing him for months, without him replying. I did not however raise the issue, because there really was no reason for that anymore, as the problems had already been solved, albeit on the expense of my other RTW preparations. Neither did he. He must have had his reasons to leave me in trouble, even though I am not able to guess what they might be. Enough paying trekkers and groups already, and therefore no interest in a solo birder? Perhaps the decisive issue was my disinterest in employing a guide? Guiding is the most lucrative business they have.

The guesthouse is at -1.776232, 101.282694. There are several homestays in the neighborhood (cf. Google Maps). With arrangements such as mine, it does not really matter where one stays.

Hotel Ibis, Padang (IDR 615.000, €43, with breakfast): Nice, clean and peaceful room in a towering building with a view, and a television with some international news channels. Top floor restaurant served meals for around IDR 100.000 (€7) per plate. Good availability of Blue Bird taxi services, despite a side street location along Jalan Taman Siswa, and a reception run by professionals with a pleasant attitude. The Ibis also has a locational advantage in regard to access to the city, to and from the direction of Sungai Penuh. For Hotel Ibis, it is possible to book a room at Agoda.com or Booking.com. Recommended, even the room rate was significantly higher than in Premier Basko.

BIRDS AND SITES

Tapan Road (-2.037574, 101.330303)

West of Sungai Penuh, a 59 km road runs to the village of Tapan, across a mountain range. It is a public road and there consequently are no entry fees. The risk of meeting a **Sumatran Tiger** on the road is much exaggerated today, perhaps in order to motivate people to hire a guide. After the early morning hours, there was more trouble with heavy trucks on the mountain. Some of them made a lot of noise. Even more annoying were some of the motorbikers, who kept on yelling their greetings and asking if I was ready for a selfie with them. One of them did not even ask for a permission and consequently got a photo with my middle finger up!

Once the Tapan Road had been reached, after a half-an-hour ride from Hotel Kerinci, everything was really simple. I walked slowly three kilometers downhill on the first visit, starting at the crest of the mountain range, at -2.037574, 101.330303. For the second visit, I asked to be stopped close to the end of the first day's walk, and walked five kilometers down from there, birding as long as my driver arrived to pick me up, at an agreed time. The lower slope had more birds and more interesting species, but I felt that it was necessary to go through both altitudes, in order to grasp as much of the available diversity as possible in the short time (see Burung-nusantara.org).

On the second visit, I shared the road with a group of hunters and a sizable pack of hunting dogs. They periodically ran up and down the steep ridges, one of the men armed with a large spear, the ornamental head of which was clearly designed to give a cut which would bleed an animal dry. In between the spurts, the men and some of their dear dogs rested by the road. I requested Afrim to ask for details, which he delivered. They were hunting for wild pigs, for the food of their dogs.

Instead of the much promoted tiger, I saw four **Siamang Gibbons**, several **Black-striped Squirrels** and one **Niobe Ground Squirrel** at the Tapan Road.

Bird list (top section):

Sumatran Partridge	1, calling at sunrise.
Crested Serpent Eagle	3
Rufous-bellied Eagle	1, adult.
Sunda Frogmouth	1, calling before sunrise.
Barred Cuckoo Dove	20, at fruiting trees.
Little Cuckoo Dove	30, <i>sumatrana</i> .
Mountain Imperial Pigeon	30, at fruiting trees.
Sumatran Green Pigeon	2, a pair at a fruiting tree, fleeting views.
Green-billed Malkoha	2
Red-headed Trogon	1, on the top.
Wreathed Hornbill	5
Fire-tufted Barbet	15, at fruiting trees.
Black-browed Barbet	50, at fruiting trees.
Blue-eared Barbet	2, at fruiting trees.
Graceful Pitta	1, calling by the road.
Grey-chinned Minivet	2, one pair, <i>montanus</i> .
Bar-winged Flycatcher Shrike	2
Blue-masked Leafbird	1, a female.
Orange-spotted Bulbul	1, on the top.
Cream-striped Bulbul	9, an attractive species.
Grey-chested Jungle Flycatcher	1
Sunda Robin	1, male <i>sumatrana</i> , at the top.
Grey-throated Babbler	15, <i>larvata</i> .
Golden Babbler	2, <i>frigida</i> .
Grey-headed Babbler	8, <i>pulla</i> .
Rusty-breasted Wren Babbler	1
Mountain White-eye	5
Yellow-bellied Warbler	2
Golden-bellied Gerygone	2, very adaptable species, at high and low altitudes.
Temminck's Sunbird	1
Fire-breasted Flowerpecker	5
Sumatran Drongo	4, a compact species for a drongo.
Ashy Drongo	2, one pair, <i>phaedrus</i> .
Sumatran Treepie	7, common and easy to observe.
Black Magpie	1, in loose association with the treepies.

Bird list (bottom section):

Bronze-tailed Peacock Pheasant	1, male, lekking by the road.
Crested Serpent Eagle	1
Blyth's Hawk Eagle	1, adult.
Barred Cuckoo Dove	4
Little Cuckoo Dove	10+, <i>sumatrana</i> .
Sumatran Green Pigeon	2, a pair in a fruiting tree, excellent views.
Mountain Imperial Pigeon	4
Greater Coucal	1
Edible-nest Swiftlet	3
Sumatran Trogon	1, the first bird of the morning.
Wreathed Hornbill	5
Black-browed Barbet	25, at fruiting trees.
Blue-eared Barbet	5, at fruiting trees.
Lesser Yellownappe	1
Grey-chinned Minivet	3, <i>montanus</i> .
Bar-winged Flycatcher Shrike	6, three pairs.
Black-winged Flycatcher Shrike	2, one pair.
Blue-headed Leafbird	15, at fruiting trees, in a mixed party.
Sumatran Leafbird	4, at fruiting trees, in a mixed party.
Crested Jay	2, <i>coronatus</i> , a future split?
Sumatran Treepie	10
Pacific Swallow	2
Blue Nuthatch	8, in a mixed party.
Cream-striped Bulbul	20+, pleasantly common.
Spot-necked Bulbul	6, excellent views.
Ruby-throated Bulbul	2, in a mixed party.
Verditer Flycatcher	1, male.
Brown-winged Whistling Thrush	1, a territory with a stream and rocks, by the road.
Grey-throated Babbler	10, <i>larvata</i> .
Grey-headed Babbler	6, <i>pulla</i> .
Marbled Wren Babbler	1, about one third of the way down.
Pin-striped Babbler	2
Mountain White-eye	4
Oriental White-eye	2
Black-capped White-eye	5
Yellow-bellied Warbler	1
Fire-breasted Flowerpecker	5
Black-and-crimson Oriole	30+, at fruiting trees, in a mixed party.
Sumatran Drongo	6
Ashy Drongo	8, <i>phaedrus</i> .
Bronzed Drongo	1

Mt. Kerinci Summit Trail (-1.747341, 101.259323)

4.5 km or 10 minutes north of the Subandi Homestay at Kersik Tuo, there is the trailhead of Mt. Kerinci Summit Trail. Unfortunately, the access road does not go all the way to the edge of the forest. It probably has done so, but clearing for agriculture has advanced, and it is now necessary to walk on the field, on an uncomfortably stony track for 450 meters, before the forest is reached, at a gate with a large pile of rotting rubbish.

The edge area is, however, good in the evenings. Bring your headlamp and perhaps also a trekking pole, to avoid tripping on the round stones on your way back in the darkness! In the forest, there are no stones and the trail is more level.

There is an entrance fee of IDR 150.000 (€11) per day, payable at Kersik Tuo accommodations. In the evening, one may not need to go in to look and listen for the birds. In any case, there is not likely to be anybody there to check the entrance tickets, if one goes a short distance in, at the forest's edge. The fee has primarily been introduced for people who climb to the summit and back.

In the early morning, there may not be others sharing the trail. I was practically alone, excluding a group of fellow guesthouse dwellers, including one particularly noisy Dutchman, who talked to himself all the time. There will, however, be people during the rest of the day, towards late afternoon in particular. Tired trekkers return from the summit, attempting to reach their accommodations by sunset.

I spent one evening at the site and walked the first part of the trail up early in the next morning. By the first part I mean the relatively short (1 km) walk from the gate to the first rest area/shelter ('Base Camp'), a known stake-out for **Salvadori's Pheasants**. One was seen there and another one in the scrub by the entrance gate, in late afternoon. In the morning, I moved very silently and slowly, and played my recordings sparsely, mostly when returning down to the gate.

The first trekkers were met half way down the trail, two hours after the sunrise. Before that, it was only me, monkeys and birds there. In several occasions, the shy but curious birds arrived to observe me, when I stalked them low by the forest floor, frozen but senses on full alert. At first sight, the forest appears to be empty. Then one hears the birds, perhaps just moving, and then, if lucky, sees them.

The local mammals seemed to prefer the trailhead area. Perhaps it is more secure than the rest of the forest? I saw about 40 **Agile** and a family of five **Siamang Gibbons** on the trail. The male of the latter is always an impressive sight when it arrives to inspect an intruder. In addition, one **Low's Squirrel** was spotted.

Bird list:

Salvadori's Pheasant	2, at the entrance gate and at the first rest area.
Red-billed Partridge	6, actively calling in the morning.
Crested Serpent Eagle	1
Black-winged Kite	1, in the fields.
Javan Woodcock	2, one heard and one seen flying at the forest's edge.
Barred Cuckoo Dove	2
Wedge-tailed Green Pigeon	4, two pairs.
Mountain Imperial Pigeon	2
Rajah Scops Owl	2, active only for a short period at the sunset.
Barred Eagle Owl	1
Short-tailed Frogmouth	1, active only for a short period at the sunset.
Salvadori's Nightjar	1, close to the entrance gate.
Greater Coucal	1
Black-browed Barbet	9, at a fruiting tree.
Long-tailed Shrike	3, in the fields.
Mountain Tailorbird	1
Sunda Warbler	10+
White-rumped Shama	2
Shiny Whistling Thrush	2, both arrived to meet me.
Sumatran Wren Babbler	8, excellent close views, one less than one meter away.
Rusty-breasted Wren Babbler	8, excellent close views, two birds at my feet, for example.
Grey-throated Babbler	20
Spot-necked Babbler	1, excellent close (<1 m) views, not far from the entrance.

FINAL THOUGHTS

I did not really enjoy traveling in Sumatra. In the end, I was nevertheless relatively happy with my birding results, given the problems on the way, predominantly in regard to basic tourism services. Most importantly, many great endemic birds were seen, and seen well. The weather was fine all the time and the flights were on time. The field arrangements went reasonably well, even though there was the extra stress involved, much like things tend to be in Indonesia.

I wish I had had two more days in Sumatra, to be able to add some missed species, such as **Schneider's Pitta**, **Sunda Forktail**, **White-necked Babbler**, and **Sumatran** and **Black Laughingthrushes**. At the time I reserved my flights, I did not guess how time-consuming moving around in West Sumatra was going to be. I should have known better, but for me, it is somehow difficult to get rid of the in general more advanced image of Asia. In Asia, there is a clear demarcation between states of uncontrolled population growth and states of more or less stable population, to the advantage of the latter. Nevertheless, there is no reason why Sumatra could not be birded independently, especially by birders who are fitter and younger than I am.

Good luck with your visit in West Sumatra!