

BIRDWATCHING  
IN  
SARAWAK  
MALAYSIA, BORNEO





**Sarawak**, the legendary land of headhunters and hornbills, is Malaysia's largest state, occupying the northwestern portion of the great island of Borneo. Here, the ever-wet rainforests reach unparalleled diversity and are home to a dizzying array of tropical wildlife. A great portion of Borneo's 650 bird species have been recorded in the state, including most of the island's endemics such as the bizarre Bornean Bristlehead. With the highest number of national parks and nature reserves in



Blue-banded Pitta  
*Erythropitta arquata*

the country (more than 600,000 hectares of totally protected areas), Sarawak offers superb birdwatching opportunities. These range from balmy lowlands and shorelines to cold mossy forests at the summits of the higher mountains. The map on page 9 shows Sarawak's most important protected areas, representing excellent birding sites, as well as important Bird Areas (IBAs).

### Southern Sarawak

With an international airport and good roads, Kuching is a logical place to begin any birding adventure in Sarawak. There are numerous nature reserves within an hour of the city that offer a variety of birdwatching opportunities. One of the most popular is **Kubah National Park**, which has beautiful lowland rainforest and a great diversity of birds. A number of endemic species including Bornean Banded Kingfisher, Bornean Wren Babbler, and Blue-banded Pitta can be found here.

Bornean Barbet  
*Psilopogon eximius*



Chien C. Lee

Located near the coast is the spectacular **Santubong National Park**, with its rugged sandstone terrain and tall rainforest. This is the closest site to Kuching which offers a chance of seeing one of Sarawak's most emblematic birds, the Rhinoceros Hornbill. Perhaps better known for its population of reintroduced orangutans, **Semenggoh Nature Reserve** is also an excellent birdwatching destination that hosts many lowland birds, including the rare Long-billed Partridge.

Further to the south, near the Indonesian border, **Borneo Highlands** consists of a range of forested hills culminating in Mount Penrissen at over 1300 m in elevation. Designated as an IBA in 2010, this area offers one of the best chances to see the White-crowned Hornbill, and some of Borneo's endemic submontane birds, such as Pygmy White-eye, Chestnut-crested Yuhina, Bornean Barbet, and Mountain Serpent-Eagle.

**Batang Ai National Park** can be reached by a four hour drive from Kuching followed by a boat ride across the reservoir. With its numerous crystal clear rivers, Iban longhouses, and chances of seeing wild orangutan, this park is a popular adventure destination. It is a great place to view several hornbill species and many lowland birds, including Garnet Pitta, Bornean Wren Babbler, Rail Babbler, and the rare Bulwer's Pheasant.



Chien C. Lee

## Central Sarawak

Located in the middle of Sarawak, roughly 25 km northeast of the coastal town of Bintulu, **Similajau National Park** encompasses an area of 90 sq. km of mixed lowland dipterocarp, kerangas, and mangrove forests. The calls of gibbons and wing beats of Wrinkled Hornbills are often heard on morning walks. Also spotted here are Black Hornbill, Dusky Broadbill, Bornean Bristlehead, Hook-billed Bulbul, and Malaysian Honeyguide.



Dusky Broadbill  
*Corydon sumatranus*

Although the main attractions in **Niah National Park** are its incredible limestone caves, some of which contain archaeological remains and cave paintings, the park has a well-designed network of trails and boardwalks through pristine forest. A great assortment of forest birds can be found here including trogons, babblers, and barbets, as well as teeming multitudes of cave swiftlets.

Directly to the east of Niah lies **Loagan Bunut National Park**, which contains Sarawak's largest natural freshwater lake. Situated in the floodplain of the Tinjar River, the lake is surrounded by lowland dipterocarp and peat swamp forest. Although the water levels fluctuate throughout the year, many fish-eating birds, such as Oriental Darter, Grey-headed Fish Eagle, Lesser Fish Eagle and Osprey, can be found here.



Bornean Bristlehead  
*Pityriasis gymnocephala*

The rugged forested hills that can be seen from Miri city belong to the famous **Lambir Hills National Park**. Home to one of the world's highest tree diversities, this beautiful rainforest has been the focus of many ecological studies. Many visitors come to Lambir to swim in the clear waters beneath the picturesque waterfalls, but the park is also an excellent destination for any birdwatcher willing to tackle the steep trails. Bornean Bristlehead is regularly seen here along with beautiful forest birds such as Garnet Pitta, and several species of babblers, barbets, and flycatchers.

Just northeast of Miri city, the **Kuala Baram Wetlands** covers 600 hectares of marshland at the mouth of the Baram River. A variety of species of waterbirds can be found here including the Chinese Egret and the critically endangered Chinese Crested Tern.



Bornean Banded Kingfisher  
*Lacedo melanops*



White-crowned Hornbill  
*Berenicornis comatus*

A UNESCO World Heritage Site, **Gunung Mulu National Park** is Sarawak's most famous park. Although renowned for its amazing limestone cave systems, Mulu is incredibly biodiverse and hosts a wealth of rare flora and fauna. The entrance to Deer Cave is an almost guaranteed site for the Bat Hawk, especially at dusk when up to 1.8 million Wrinkle-lipped Bats emerge from the cave. Mulu has an eye-catching bird list of 262 species, which includes all eight species of Bornean hornbills, and over half of the island's endemics such as Fruithunter, Hose's Broadbill, and Whitehead's Spiderhunter. Montane specialities can only be seen via a multi-day trek to the upper slopes of Mount Mulu.

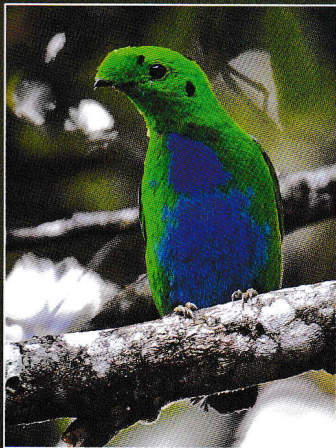


Blue-headed Pitta  
*Pitta baudii*

### Northern Sarawak

**Pulong Tau National Park** is Sarawak's largest reserve, comprising nearly 600 sq. km of pristine montane rainforest. Occupying the western flank of the Kelabit highlands, its spectacular mountain landscapes include Mount Murud, Sarawak's highest peak (2,424 m), and the Tama Abu range. The main villages, Bario, Ba' Kelalan, Long Banga and Long Lellang, can be reached by flights from Miri, or alternatively, by four-wheel-drive vehicle. More than 300 species of birds are listed for this park, including

Located at the north end of Pulong Tau National Park, the village of **Ba' Kelalan** can be reached by a short flight or a full day drive from Lawas. The wooded hills surrounding the settlement are home to many choice sub-montane birds including Oriental Bay Owl, Ferruginous Partridge, Red-breasted Partridge, and the fabled Dulit Frogmouth.



Hose's Broadbill  
*Calyptomena hosii*



Black Oriole  
*Oriolus hosii*



Dulit Frogmouth  
*Batrachostomus harterti*

For higher elevation species, birdwatching along the mountain road behind Ba' Kelalan offers numerous montane endemics such as Hose's Broadbill, Fruithunter, Bornean Stubtail, Golden-naped Barbet, Mountain Barbet, and Whitehead's Spiderhunter. In the far north of Sarawak in the Ulu Trusan region, the mountainous **Payah Maga** IBA is one of the state's most promising new birding destinations. It can be reached by four-wheel-drive vehicle from the town of Lawas, and while day hikes into the forest are possible, visitors wishing to spend more time at the higher elevations should be prepared to camp in the mountain shelters. Well over 30 species of endemic hill and montane birds can be found here, among which include Mountain Serpent Eagle, Bornean Frogmouth, Whitehead's Trogon, Blue-banded Pitta, Bornean Banded Pitta, Pale-faced Bulbul, Bornean Bulbul, Bare-headed Laughingthrush, Bornean Leafbird, and Whitehead's Spiderhunter. A star feature is the highly sought after Black Oriole which was rediscovered here in 2010.



Whitehead's Trogon  
*Harpactes whiteheadi*

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Nordmann's Greenshank  
*Tringa guttifer*

Along its extensive coastline, Sarawak offers excellent wintering grounds for waders and other waterbirds. The nutrient rich mudflats, sandflats, and mangrove forests have long been recognized as a major stopover and refueling point for migrating birds. In 2007, the Bako Buntal Bay, which covers 3,590 hectares of varied intertidal habitats, coastal mudflats, and mangrove forests, was designated as an Important Bird Area (IBA). With more than 25,000 birds from 27 species recorded here, some of which are globally threatened, the Sarawak State Government recognised the importance of protecting and conserving these areas thus nominated Bako Buntal Bay as an East Asian-Australasian Flyway Network Site under the East Asian-Australasian Flyway Partnership (EAAFP) in 2013. Key species that can be seen here include the rare Asian Dowitcher, and the endangered Nordmann's Greenshank and Far Eastern Curlew. The globally Vulnerable Chinese Egret often congregates in significant

## Bako Buntal Bay



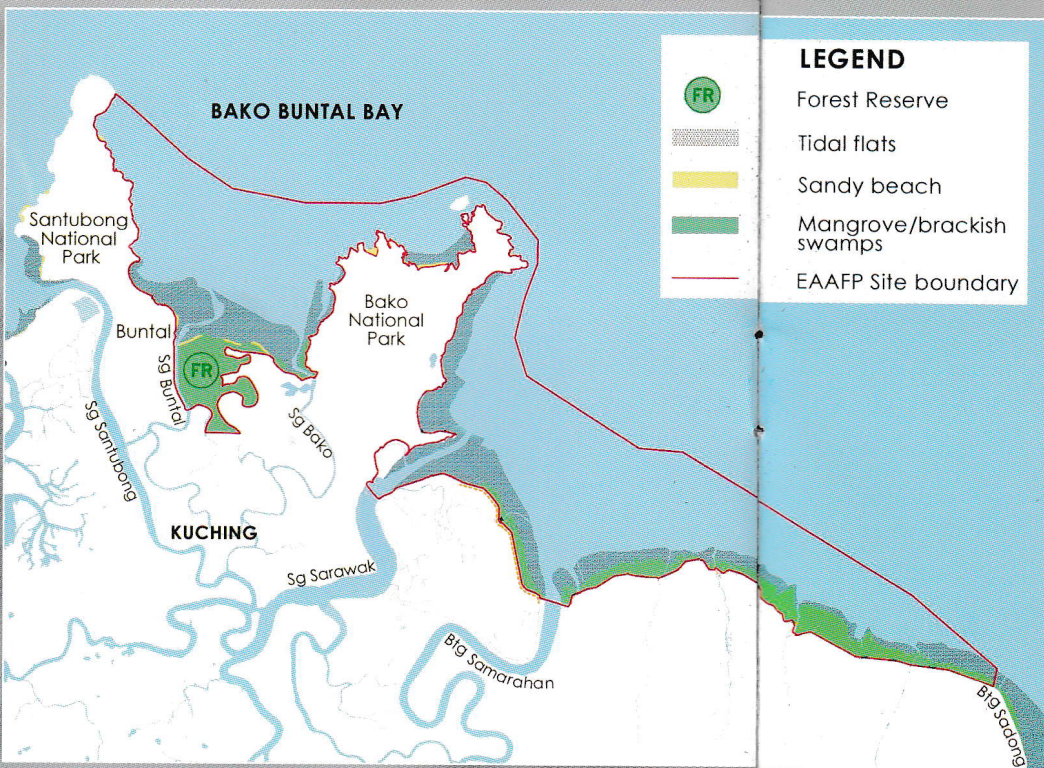
Eurasian and Far Eastern Curlews  
*Numenius arquata* & *N. madagascariensis*

numbers in the Bako Buntal Bay with possibly the largest concentration of the species in Borneo. Other sought after shorebirds include Great Knot, Grey-tailed Tattler, and the Lesser Adjutant. Being flanked by both Bako and Santubong National Parks, the coastline of Bako Buntal Bay is sparsely developed. The most readily visited spot is Buntal Village, a small fishing settlement located at the base of the Santubong Peninsula, a 30-minute drive from Kuching City. This village provides several vantage points to view the bay, as well as easy access to the shoreline.

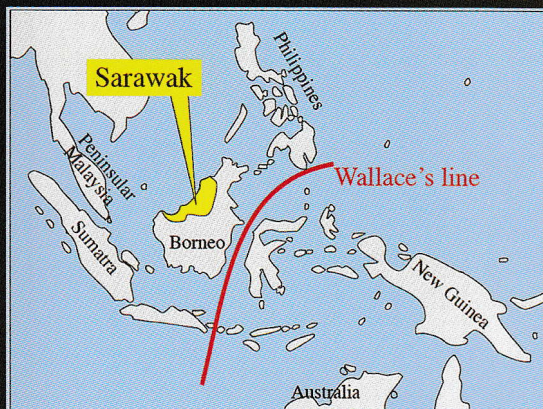
The best time to visit is at low tide during the winter months between September and March.



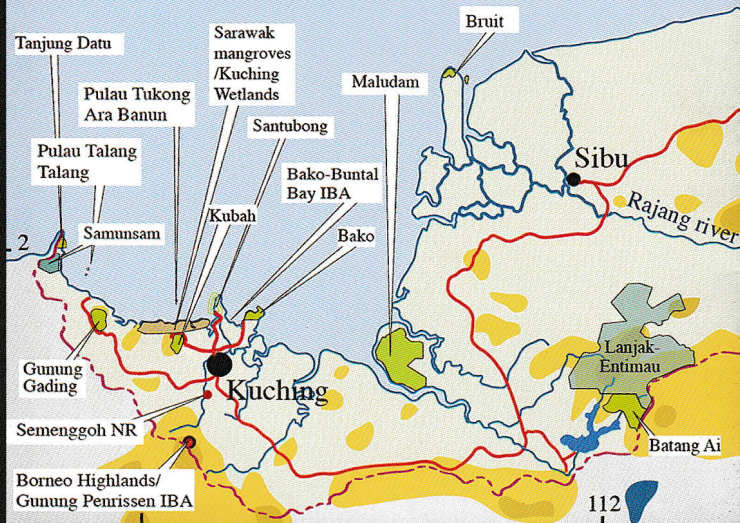
Chinese Egret  
*Egretta ulophotes*



Overview of the East Asian-Australasian Flyway Partnership (EAAFP) Network Site: Bako Buntal Bay



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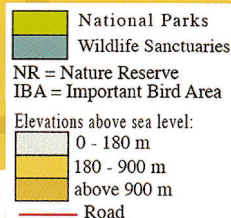
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South China Sea



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**Further reading:**

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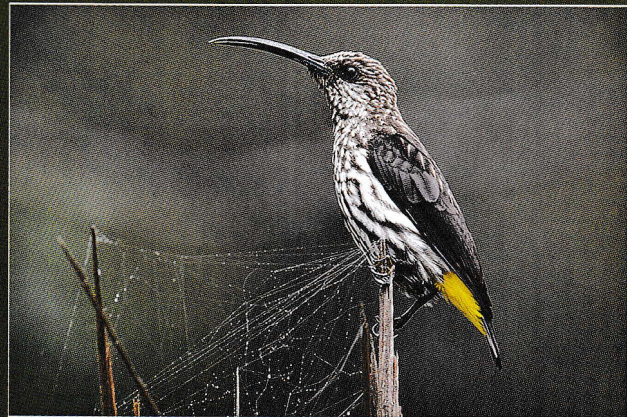
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Front cover image by Chien C. Lee: *Erythropitta arquata*  
 Back cover image by Hans P. Hazebroek: Rhinoceros Hornbill *Buceros rhinoceros*



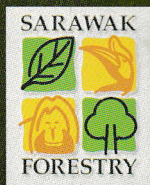
Whitehead's Spiderhunter  
*Archanothera juliae*



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