

Guest Editorial

David Wells*

It is probably right to claim that Malaysia was the first Southeast Asian country to acquire a 'bird report' in its name, launched in 1963 to share findings among a still tiny number of bird-watchers braving ridicule in the field and, from behind the scenes, grumblings that birds had hogged the pages of the Malayan Nature Journal to the detriment of other, more respectable subjects. Gathering efforts into one common space it was considered would at least correct that perception and, at the same time, encourage contributions from folk who would have shrunk from publishing their discoveries individually. Over time, other titles with well-known names replaced the original and, with a few stops and starts, have together covered more than half century, forming a unique archive, much consulted including for the writing of two generations of avifauna handbooks.

Running, and keeping on running, a periodical of any sort, particularly one built on collaboration, is no mean undertaking, and almost inevitably there have been occasional 'breaks in transmission'. How ironic however that recently this now great bird-watching country should, as a result, have found itself to be the only one of its kind in the region without a home-grown talking shop. Of course, there is always eBird, and long may it prosper, but that international enterprise was surely never meant to compete for the range of possibilities open to a country-level production. Neighbours do not seem to have thought so and surely neither do most Malaysian birders.

Hats off then to Amar, Kim Chye and Swee Yian for rescuing the situation by deciding to make possible and promptly launch the first issue of this exciting new forum, the 'Malaysian Bird Report'. They embark on their venture with eyes open to past history and an action plan based on teamwork that will put regularity and frequency of issuing (online, of course) to the fore - on guard against the old trend of more and more work landing on fewer and fewer shoulders, leading first to frustrating delays, then to the risk of field findings held back for ever in the pages of private notebooks. All that the editors will have no immediate control over is a re-growing of contributor confidence, which they know they will have to earn.'

Why are they doing this? Almost certainly because, like everyone with a thinking interest in biodiversity, they are gripped by a sense of urgency, recognising that within living memory the Malaysian bird fauna has entered an almost unique state of dynamism. On the one hand, its core 'Sundaland' (see figure below) community of lowland forest birds – in terms of number of species living together close to the richest on earth – has within living memory been reduced to fragments, not even the largest or which can it be assumed will stay stable. On the other, the equatorial forest barrier having been breached, northern and southern outer tropical avifaunas are fast gaining access to territory they likely have not inhabited since the last ice age.

Today's birders stand witness to all aspects of this fast-moving drama and history demands that no time be lost in describing and recording it; there may not be a second chance. Look out for what is occurring, where, when and under what circumstances, conversely, what perhaps was formerly easy to find but now isn't, and – with expected new emphasis in this



publication – what individual birds are doing and how they are doing it. In short, natural history, involving actual bird-WATCHING – one of Amar's well-known specialisms.

So, whatever your current field skill level, follow what is going on and join the contributing community. There is talk of including an advice panel, of discussion space, of suggesting project titles (from school level upwards), and even of publishing short write-ups, or extracts of papers that readers might not otherwise get to see – in effect, something for everyone.

How much more interesting and exciting to be out in pursuit of a community goal and, as a consequence, armed with that piece of fieldwork magic, a search-image. You will soon have understood how difficult it is to spend a day in the field without learning something new.

Good birding.

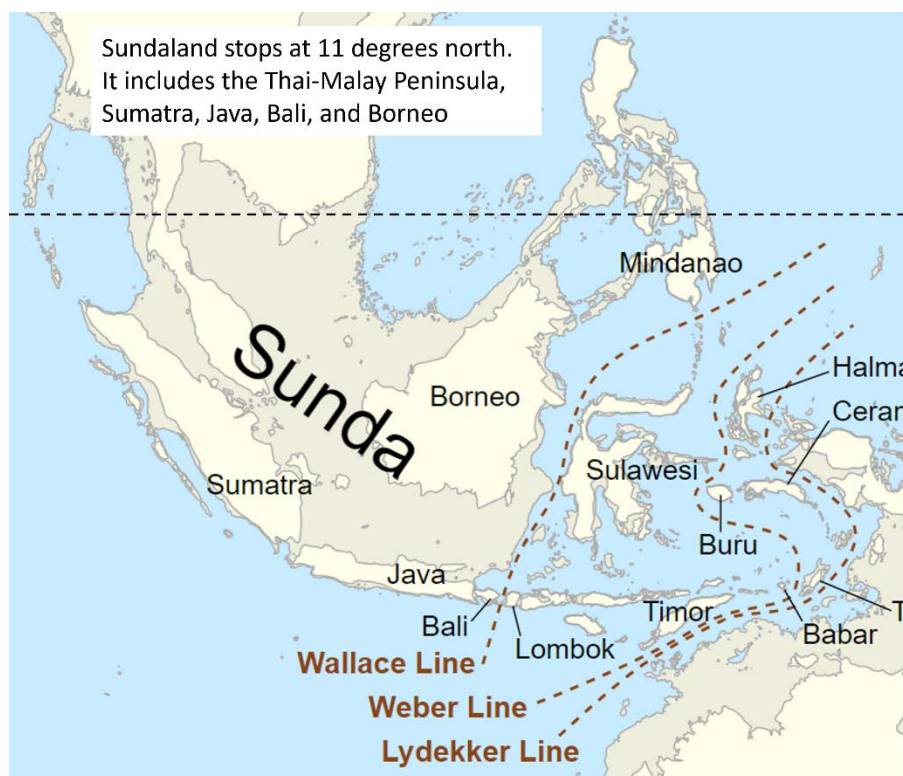


Figure: By Kanguole - Own work, based on File: Map of Sunda and Sahul.png and using Coastline from Natural Earth 1:50m Physical Vectors 125m depth contour derived from 2-Minute Gridded Global Relief Data (ETOPO2) v2, NOAA National Centers for Environmental Information, using gdal contour (from GDAL), CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=127823375>

Note: Map reduced in scope and edited to show mainly Sundaland.

Editorial Note:

*Dr David Wells' two-volume work, *The Birds of the Thai-Malay Peninsula: Vol. 1 - Non-passerines* (1999) and *The Birds of the Thai-Malay Peninsula Vol. 2: Passerines* (2007) remains the standard reference for anyone with a serious interest in the birds of Peninsular Malaysia. With Lord Medway, he began the first regular publication of bird observations in Peninsular Malaysia, the 'Malayan Bird Report', in 1963. He has numerous publications and an encyclopaedic knowledge of birdlife in the region.