

Field Notes

First Nesting Record of the Rufous-bellied Eagle *Lophotriorchis kienerii* in Malaysia: Evidence from Kenyir Forest, Terengganu

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The Rufous-bellied Eagle *Lophotriorchis kienerii* is a striking forest raptor, small-to-medium in size, and easily recognised by its rufous underparts and contrasting dark upperparts (Plate 1). It ranges across much of Southeast Asia and parts of South Asia, and is currently listed as Near Threatened due to habitat loss.

In Terengganu, this species is regularly seen gliding high over the forest canopy or occasionally venturing over nearby open areas. Yet, despite being observed fairly often in Malaysia, no nesting record had ever been documented (Wells 1999).- until now.



Plate 1: Rufous-bellied Eagle in

As a recreational birdwatcher, I have long hoped to find Malaysia's first confirmed nest of this eagle. For years, one nest in the Tembat Forest Reserve at Tasik Kenyir has caught my attention. My earliest notes go back to 2008, when I saw a dark-headed raptor sitting inside the large stick nest high in a tall Tualang tree *Koompassia excelsa* (Plate 2). The distance and viewing conditions meant I could not confirm its identity at the time, but I made it a point to return whenever I could.



Plate 2: The nesting site of the Rufous-bellied Eagle, a tall Tualang tree *Koompassia excelsa*, Tembat Forest Reserve, Tasik Kenyir, Terengganu, Malaysia.

With the help of drone technology, it became easier to check the nest quickly and with minimal disturbance. A short flight above the tree crown - no more than two minutes - was usually enough to confirm whether the nest was active. For the past four years, I have monitored the site this way alongside more traditional observation from the forest edge with binoculars, a spotting scope, and a camera.

On 18 February 2025, a routine drone check revealed an adult Rufous-bellied Eagle sitting inside the nest. Two days later, closer views confirmed a single egg (Plate 3).



Plate 3: Adult Rufous-bellied Eagle with single egg in nest, Tembat Forest Reserve, Tasik Kenyir, Terengganu, Malaysia, February 2025.

The nest itself is a substantial stick structure positioned about 4 metres below the crown of the giant Tualang tree, estimated at 57 metres tall. Interestingly, this same nest has been used by other raptors in recent years, including Blyth's Hawk-Eagle *Nisaetus alboniger* in 2022 and 2024.

Over the following months, I made 11 brief visits as part of other birdwatching activities in the Kenyir area.

Key moments include:

20 February	An adult and a single egg clearly visible (Plate 3).
5 April	A small downy chick seen for the first time, suggesting it had just hatched (Plate 4).
16 May	One adult arrived carrying a Green Crested Lizard, which was fed to the growing chick (Plate 5 right).
28 June	The young bird, now fully feathered, stood alone in the nest.
10 July	No eagle present; we concluded the juvenile had fledged successfully.



Plate 4: Downy Rufous-bellied Eagle chick with adult, Tembat Forest Reserve, Tasik Kenyir, Terengganu, Malaysia, April 2025.



Plate 5: Rufous-bellied Eagle chick (left) May 2025 and nestling with adult June 2025 (right), Tembat Forest Reserve, Tasik Kenyir, Terengganu, Malaysia.

Discussion

There is limited information on the breeding of this raptor (Clark *et al.*, 2020). Nests are usually large and built in the crown of a large tree in dense forest (Ferguson-Lees & Christie 2005; Jayaneththi 2010; Iqbal *et al.*, 2011). Clutch is usually one egg; incubation and care of nestlings is by both parents (Clark *et al.*, 2020).

Why This Matters

This record is significant because it:

- Expands the known breeding range of the Rufous-bellied Eagle into Peninsular Malaysia.

- Adds to baseline data for raptor conservation in Southeast Asia.
- Shows the value of long-term, patient observation in detecting rare breeding events.
- Highlights how citizen scientists - ordinary birdwatchers - can make meaningful contributions to ornithology.

Citizen Science in Action

This finding was not the result of a formal research project, but rather the persistence of a local birdwatcher returning to a site over many years. It demonstrates the important role of Malaysia's growing birding community in contributing new knowledge. By sharing sightings, photos, and notes, birdwatchers can help paint a fuller picture of our avifauna and inspire conservation action.

Conclusion

The successful fledging of a Rufous-bellied Eagle chick at Kenyir marks Malaysia's first confirmed nesting record for the species. For Terengganu, it further enhances the state's reputation as a rich birding destination (McAfee 2024). For me personally, it has been a reminder that even casual birdwatchers, through patient observation, can add something valuable to our shared understanding of Malaysia's wildlife.

Together, citizen and professional scientists can ensure that discoveries like this continue to inform both conservation and the joy of birdwatching.

References

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