

Birdwatching Hotspots Series:

Rundum Highlands, a New Frontier for Bird Watching

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On a recent bird watching trip to Sabah, North Borneo, Ron Pudín suggested I (Amar) visit the Rundum Highlands. Prior to this, there have been only two trips to explore the Rundum Highlands; both occurring this year (Wu 2024). Our trip there, as well as recent explorations by Ron Pudín, Jason Bugay Reyes and colleagues, suggest that this location is an exciting new frontier for bird watching.

The Rundum Highlands are located in the southern part of Sabah, North Borneo, not far from the Kalimantan border (see Plate 1). The elevation is 1,200-1,300 m ASL, making it a submontane region. Much of the region is primary forest and it is cold at night with lots of mist (clouds) in the early morning.

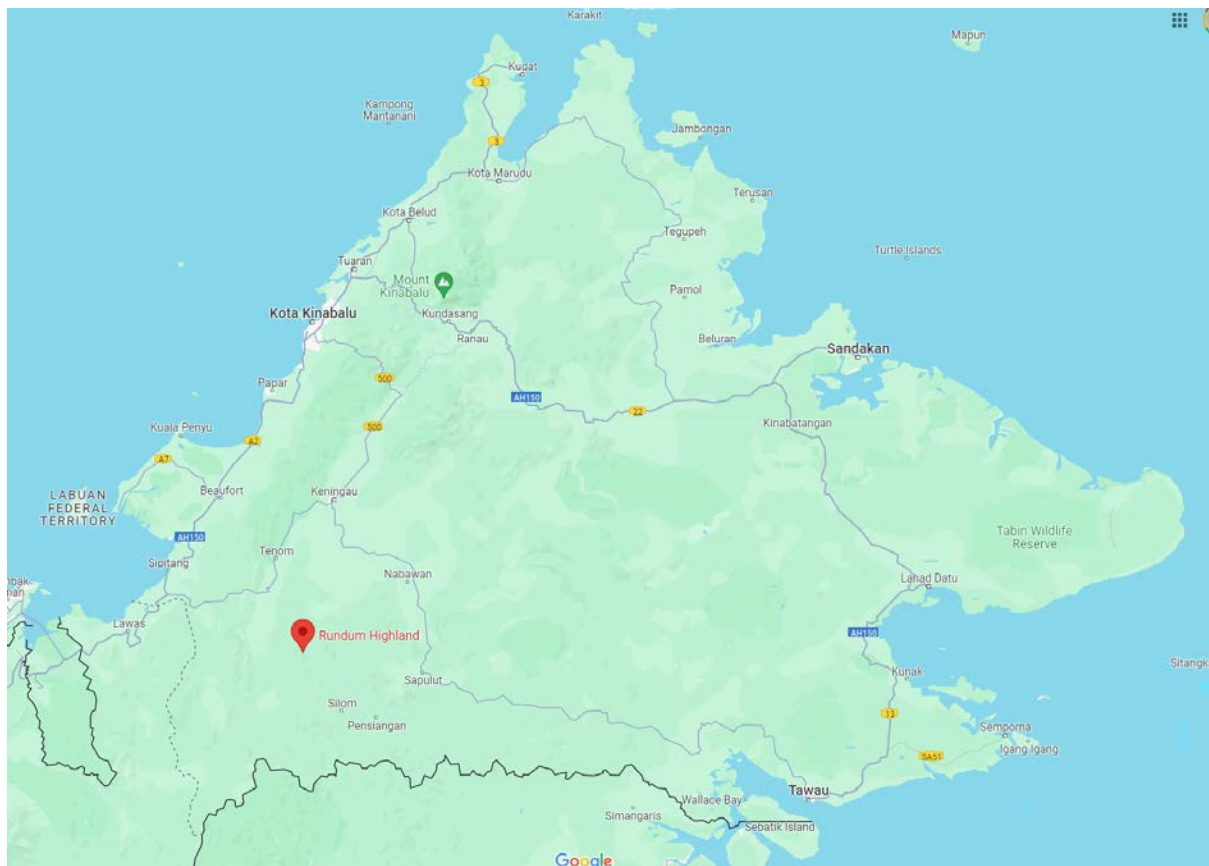


Plate 1: Location of the Rundum Highlands on Google Maps

Rundum Highlands is 60-70 km from Tenom. Getting there currently is difficult as the access 'road' is being upgraded, and many sections are mud based and are difficult to negotiate when it rains. An experienced driver with a good 4-wheel drive is required. It is expected by the end of the year that most of the road will have gravel and possibly be tarred by early 2025.

There is a small village with a small primary school and the main agricultural activity is planting hill padi. Accommodation at present is a simple rest house (see Plate 2). Comfortable chalets, nestled in the forest, have been built by Gerald Ramsay Baxter and are awaiting electricity supply and road access to become operational. Currently a portable generator is used at night for electricity supply and hot showers. Internet connectivity is extremely poor which makes it a great place to disconnect but note that there are plans to erect a telecommunications tower soon. Food is catered from the villagers – simple but nourishing fare. Vegetables cooked with ginger flowers were surprisingly both spicy and tasty. There is a well-equipped kitchen in the rest house to use.



Plate 2: Rundum Highlands Village and accommodation

The villagers see the potential for ecotourism, especially bird watching and bird photography, as well as camping. They are surprisingly knowledgeable about birds and have local names for many birds – there is a need to document this from the village elders. For example, Alimbunu refers to the Black-and-crimson Oriole *Oriolus consanguineus*, and Lumbar to the rarely seen Black Oriole *Oriolus hosii*. They have good observations and spotting skills. We were informed about, and observed, the active nests of the Aberrant Bush Warbler (Sunda) *Horornis flavolivaceus* [*vulcanius* Group] and Sunda Scimitar-Babbler *Pomatorhinus bornensis*. The Sunda Scimitar-Babbler is heard often and can be seen at the rest house (see Plate 3).



Plate 3: Sunda Scimitar-Babbler seen at the rest house and a nest spotted by villages

Two brothers, Rusli and Din Tampisan, were our local guides. Rusli leads the Rundum village community-based ecotourism and has hopes to develop the work for the village. They are learning how to establish hides and bird watching trails are being developed north and south of the village. Right now, these are in their infancy stages but the potential is huge. At one hide the Blue-banded Pitta *Erythropitta arquata* visits occasionally and at another we heard the calls of the Long-billed Partridge *Rhizothera longirostris*. The Black Partridge *Melanoperdix niger* has been sighted and the Black Oriole calls heard.

While sitting in a hide or walking the trails do not be surprised to have a number of Wreathed Hornbills *Rhyticeros undulatus* fly close overhead with loud wing beats (see Plate 4). Or to hear the frequent calls of Barking Deer. We were also fortunate to see a beautiful Malayan Weasel *Mustela nudipes* hunting for rats at the chalets (see Plate 4). At night do not be fooled by the many frogs and insects that make bird-like calls.



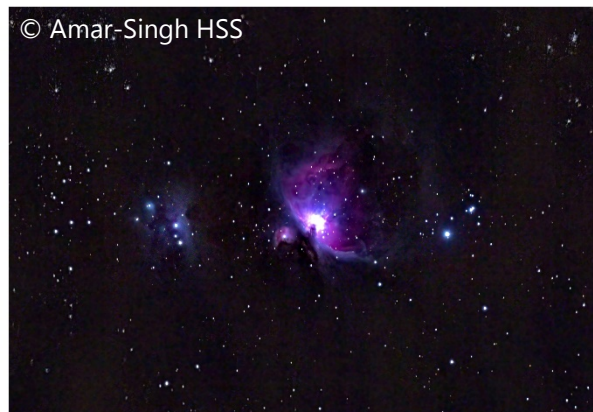
Plate 4: Wreathed Hornbills in flight (left) and Malayan Weasel hunting for rats

Other interesting birds seen include the Bornean Bristlehead *Pityriasis gymnocephala*, and the less frequently seen Eyebrowed Wren-Babbler *Napothera epilepidota* (see Plate 5). Rundum Highlands is a great place to see the elusive and usually high canopy barbets - Bornean Barbet *Psilopogon eximius* and Mountain Barbet *Psilopogon monticola*. We saw large numbers and understood from the villagers that during the fruiting season they are even easier to see much lower down.

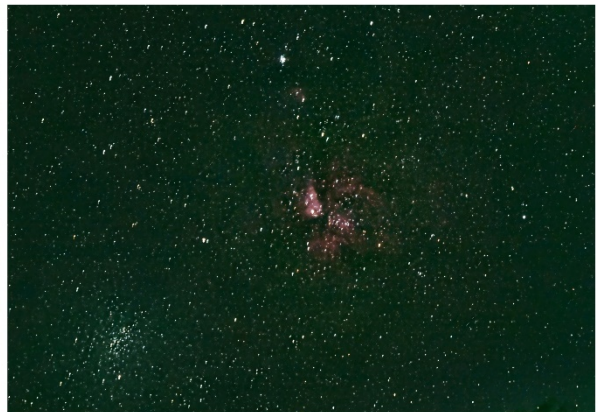


Plate 5: Eyebrowed Wren-Babbler

Bird watchers and photographers should take advantage of the dark skies at Rundum Highlands to do long lens astrophotography (see Plate 6).



Orion's Nebula. Nikon Z9, 600mm, f/5.6, 1 sec exposures, ISO 16,000, 25 image stack.



Carina Nebula & nearby star clusters in the Milky Way. Nikon Z9, 200mm, f/5.6, 1 sec exposures, ISO 16,000, 40 image stack.

Plate 6: Long lens astrophotography

Once access has been developed, bird watchers may want to consider spending time not just at Rundum but also at the lowlands Naluyan Jungle Lodge which is nestled into the Crocker Range – two hours from the Rundum Highlands. It is a well-developed resort, rich in bird life.

The potential of Rundum Highlands and the surrounding forest is best summed up in the stirring words of a village elder. He pointed to a nearby range of mountains and said that, as far as he is aware, no one has ever visited them. Rundum holds the prospects of birds yet undiscovered.

**Rundum in History: The Rundum Rebellion**

The forest at Rundum is well known as the location of the uprising of the Murut community against the British North Borneo Chartered Company (BCNBC). The BCNBC imposed many taxes on the locals and compelled every Murut family to give their first-born children as forced (unpaid) labour. In 1915 Ontoros Antanom united the Murut communities to fight the BCNBC and free them from exploitation. Despite using blowpipes, swords and spears, they prevailed against the British soldiers equipped with firearms. The British then invited Antanom to a peace conference at Rundum but actually laid a trap for him and his followers on their way to the conference. He and followers were arrested and executed, ending the resistance.

References

1. Reyes, J. B. (2024). Rundum Highland, Tenom. Birders Of Sabah Borneo Island. [online] <https://jasonbugayreyes.blogspot.com/2024/01/rundum-highland-tenom.html> Accessed on 25 March 2024
2. Wu, V. T. (2024). Rundum birding expedition in Tenom. Media report in the Daily Express. [online] <https://www.dailyexpress.com.my/news/228055/rundum-birding-expedition-in-tenom/> Accessed on 22 March 2024

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