

Mixed Species of Hornbills Feeding on Bats

Eddy Wong, James Lee, Simon Bong, Song-Wei Tan, Jenny Kam & Boon Leng

Hornbill predation of bats is now well established with recent reports (Amar-Singh HSS 2025; Tella et al., 2025). Of the local species we have observations of hornbills feeding on bats for the Oriental Pied-Hornbill *Anthracoceros albirostris* (Amar-Singh HSS 2025), Bushy-crested Hornbill *Anorrhinus galeritus* (Tella et al., 2025) and Black Hornbill *Anthracoceros malayanus* (Hall 1996; IUCN Hornbill Specialist Group 2025). For the Rhinoceros Hornbill *Buceros rhinoceros* we have a single image observation by Ahmad Amir Isqandar (Malaysian Bird Report 2023) and details are lacking.

The Gomantong Caves, Sandakan, Sabah, Borneo, Malaysia is well known as a site to observe raptor and hornbill species feeding on bats. There are two locations where birders can view the action of hornbills and raptors catching bats at Gomantong Caves. One is at the Simud Putih view point platform. The other is at the Simud Hitam (the black cave) (Plate 1). The commonest species of bats reported at Gomantong Caves is Wrinkle-lipped Free-tailed Bat *Mops plicatus* (Tella et al., 2025) which has a body mass of 10.5–18 g.



Plate 1: Over view of Simud Hitam (black cave) where some Hornbills perch to feed on bats, Gomantong Caves, Sandakan, Sabah, Borneo, Malaysia, 02 Nov 2025.

We were at Gomantong Caves for two days, 01-02 November 2025. On 02 November 2025 at 1715 hrs we positioned ourselves at Simud Hitam to watch this phenomenon. Looking up we saw the bats fly close to the trees, nearer to the top of the limestone outcroppings. We observed five hornbill species hiding in the trees, waiting for the bats to fly close. These included a pair of Rhinoceros Hornbills, six Bushy-crested Hornbills, three Oriental Pied-

Hornbills, a pair of Wreathed Hornbills *Rhyticeros undulatus* and one Wrinkled Hornbill *Rhabdotorrhinus corrugatus* (Plate 2).

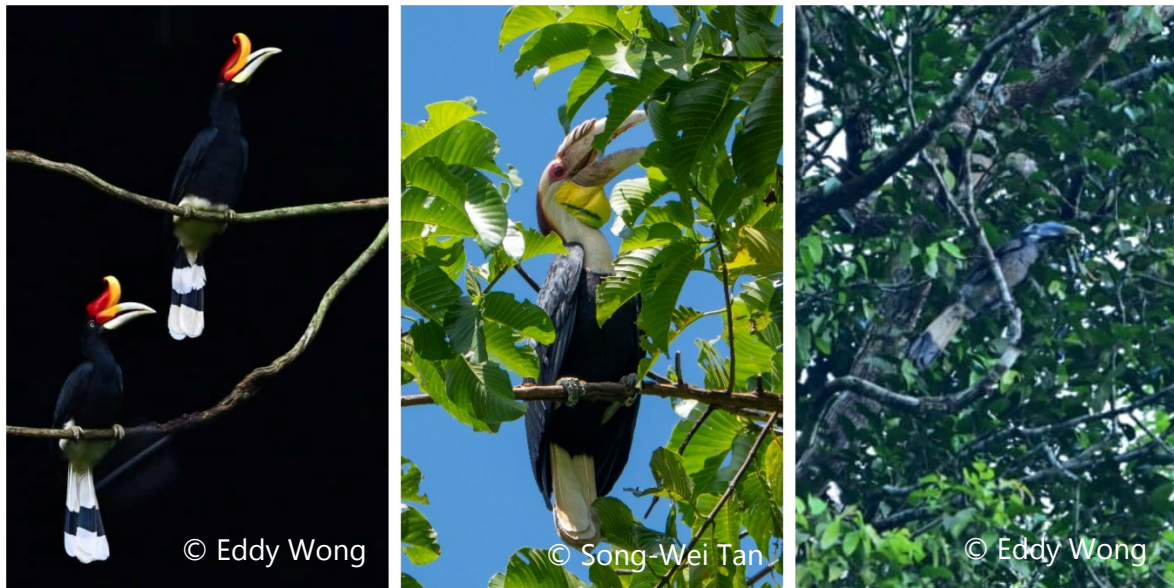


Plate 2: Hornbill species (Rhinoceros, Wreathed & Bushy-crested) waiting to feed on bats, Gomantong Caves, Sandakan, Sabah, Borneo, Malaysia, 02 Nov 2025.

At 1730 hrs we observed a Crested Serpent-Eagle *Spilornis cheela* fly in and perch on a liana (a long-stemmed woody climbing vine) near the cave. The Crested Serpent-Eagle flew into the bats streaming from the cave and used its wings to block the bats flight path. It caught a bat with the claws and dropped to the ground to feed. When it saw us approaching to take images it flew to a nearby tree to enjoy the meal (Plate 3). Crested Serpent-Eagles have not been documented to take bats as prey (Wells 1999) and this was an important observation.



Plate 3: Crested Serpent-Eagle catching & feeding on bats, Gomantong Caves, Sandakan, Sabah, Borneo, Malaysia, 02 Nov 2025.

At 1745 hrs five Bushy-crested Hornbills flew in to perch on a liana nearer to the edge of the cave (Plate 4) to hunt for bats. We did not observe them catching any bats. They also have nighttime roost on the lianas.



Plate 4: Bushy-crested Hornbills waiting to feed on bats (left) and night time roost on a liana, Gomantong Caves, Sandakan, Sabah, Borneo, Malaysia, 02 Nov 2025.

At 1750 hrs a pair of Rhinoceros Hornbills flew in and perched on a liana – they stationed themselves at the middle of the cave entrance (Plate 5). Imaging activity at this time is challenging due to low light conditions with slow shutter speeds. Hence we used video recordings to document the action. A video of the Rhinoceros Hornbills feeding can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bEa0Cgp7vAg>. Hornbills are not able to hunt for bats like raptors in flight and hence, as seen, they situate themselves in the path of the streaming bats and snag a bat with the beak. The male Rhinoceros Hornbill was feeding the female – this may have been courtship feeding activity. When we watched on 02 November 2025 the Hornbills came late at 1800 hrs and we only observed five minutes of feeding.



Plate 5: Rhinoceros Hornbills perched on a liana at cave entrance waiting to feed on bats as they exit, Gomantong Caves, Sandakan, Sabah, Borneo, Malaysia, 02 Nov 2025.

We also observed the Wreathed and Wrinkled Hornbill hunting from the trees near top of the limestone outcropping. On this trip there was no hornbill action observed from the Simud Putih platform, only from Simud Hitam cave.

Although we did not see every species of hornbill feeding on bats, their presence and behaviour suggest that all these five species come to Gomantong Caves in the evening to hunt for bats. Note one observation from Cambodia (Plate 6). There is no prior documentation in literature of bats in the diet of the Rhinoceros Hornbill (one prior picture record), Wreathed Hornbill and Wrinkled Hornbill (Wells 1999; IUCN Hornbill Specialist Group 2025).

Plate 6: Male Wreathed Hornbill observed



feeding on a bat, Cambodia, March 2023.

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