

Birdwatching Hotspots Series:

Gunung Alab Substation & Tower Station - Sub-Montane and Montane Birds 'Worst Kept Secret'

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Nestled in the Crocker range, almost 2000m ASL, there is supposed to be a 'secret' birding location that was established 10 years ago by a few local birders for the two elusive mountain partridge species, the Red-breasted Partridge *Arborophila hyperythra* (aka Bornean Partridge) and the Crimson-headed Partridge *Haematortyx sanguiniceps* (aka Blood-headed Partridge).

Gunung Alab Substation is a one and half hour drive through the winding road of Penampang from Kota Kinabalu city (see Plate 1). This used to be the main road to the southern interior of Sabah. But with recent development, it is now a scenic route to Keningau and Tenom. Google Map or Waze will bring you to the location but hiring a local bird guide will definitely bring you a fuller, more fruitful birding day trip. Note that the road up to the Gunung Alab Tower Station has loose gravel in certain sections and a four-wheel drive is advisable.

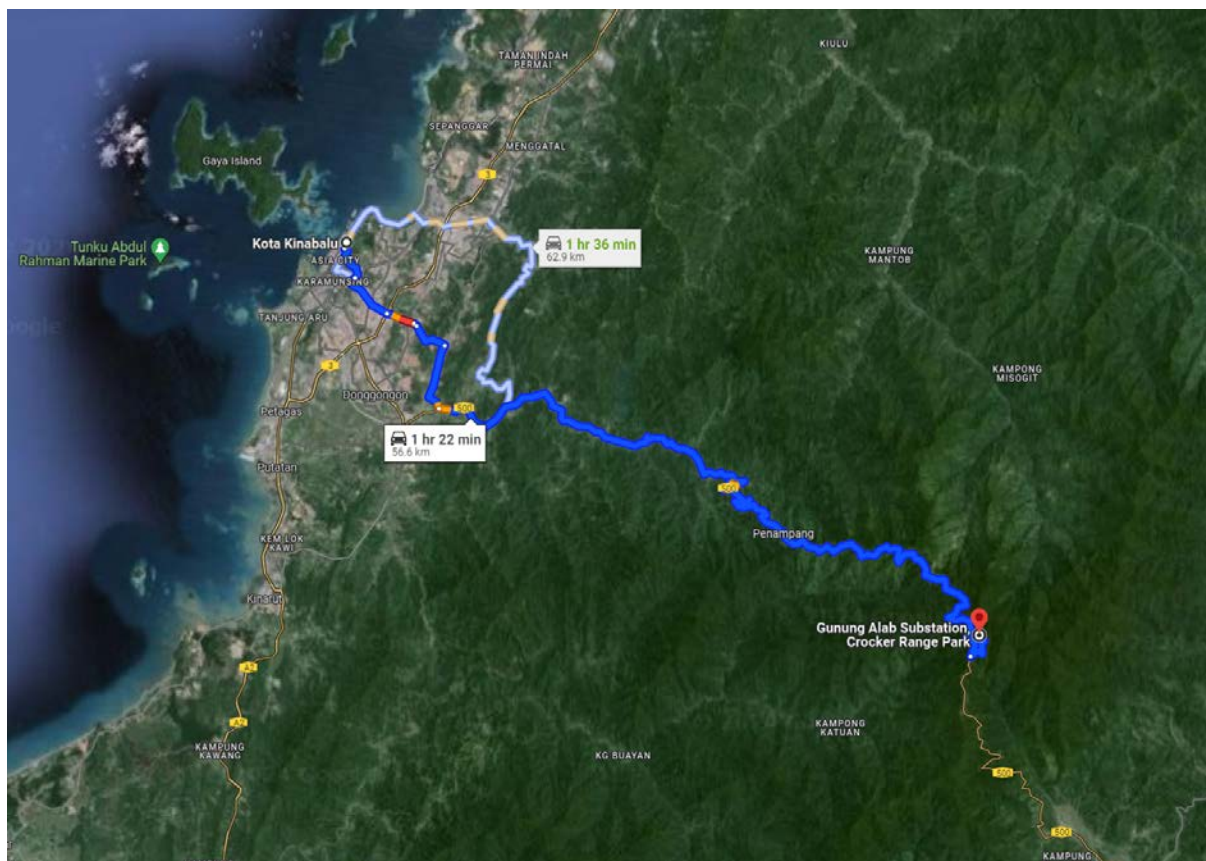


Plate 1: Location of the Gunung Alab Substation on Google Maps

Gunung Alab is managed by Sabah Parks and several accommodation options are available ranging from the basic rest house and hostel to comfortable chalet style accommodation that can cater for small groups. After dark, there are no food opportunities available at the substation and the nearest option is a 20 minutes' drive at the foothill of the road where

Gunung Alab Restaurant provides a good selection of hot foods on the menu. Accommodation at the restaurant is also an option as it doubles as a lodging facility. While having a meal at Gunung Alab Restaurant, check out the extensive swiftlet nesting occurring on the building (see Plate 2).



Plate 2: Plume-toed Swiftlet *Collocalia affinis* nesting at Gunung Alab Restaurant

The Gunung Alab Substation sits at around 1600m ASL while the Tower Station at 1900m ASL. This means that the nocturnal temperatures can be significantly lower compared to lowland forests. With the setting of the sun, one can notice the sharp decline in temperature.

This 'worst kept secret' is rich in avian sightings. According to eBird (2024) records, a total 616 checklists have been submitted and 179 species have been recorded at Gunung Alab.

As for birding experience, the place provides a basic pop-up hide and you need to bring your own stool. Be prepared to wait as the partridges will take their time to grace you with their presence. The hide is reached by a small trail down a slope where a screen has been erected. The Red-breasted and Crimson-headed Partridges (see Plate 3) are alert to bird watchers and photographers but may take time to come close. Often other birds will also show, including the Snowy-browed Flycatcher *Ficedula hyperythra*, Chestnut-hooded Laughingthrush *Pterorhinus treacheri* and Sunda Laughingthrush *Garrulax palliatus*.



Plate 3: Crimson-headed Partridge adult male with juvenile (left) and Red-breasted Partridge

The makeshift hut at the top of the location houses the guards manning the two communications towers; they are well aware of birders frequenting the locations. Here you can expect a variety of bird species, with the ever-present Indigo Flycatcher *Eumyias indigo* (Plate 4) and Little Pied Flycatcher *Ficedula westermanni* that keep you clicking your camera shutter and filling your SD card. But keep alert and scout out for the rarer and prized species like the Mountain Black-eye *Zosterops emiliae* (Plate 4) and Bare-headed Laughingthrush *Melanocichla calva*. Mixed-species foraging parties (bird waves) are common and frequent here, with the Chestnut-crested Yuhinas *Staphida everetti* playing a lead role. A Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* can often be seen on the communications towers.



Plate 4: Indigo Flycatcher (left) and Mountain Black-eye

A very notable bird to look out for is the 'Kinabalu' Friendly Bush Warbler *Locustella accentor* (Plate 5). Two sightings have been recorded at this location and we were fortunate to spot one. The Friendly Bush Warbler normally inhabits the altitude of 2135-2745m ASL and is commonly sighted on the summit trails to Gunung Kinabalu. eBird states that the Friendly Bush Warbler "Though frequently derided for the reputed inaccuracy of its name, this mouse-like bird can prove quite confiding. It is, however, generally quite difficult to see in dense undergrowth; best detected by its song, Found on only a handful of forested mountaintops in Borneo's Crocker Range, where it skulks about in tangled mossy areas with extensive fallen debris."



Plate 5: 'Kinabalu' Friendly Bush Warbler

Birds of the World (Madge 2020) states that the Friendly Bush Warbler is found in North Borneo on Mount Kinabalu and adjoining peaks of Mount Trus Madi and Tam Boyukan. Sabah Birdwatchers Association has recognized this species as one of six bird species that are endemic to Northern Borneo in the state of Sabah. It has only ever been recorded at three locations on the Crocker Range and as of today it remains elusive or non-existent outside of the Crocker Range. Its presence at the Gunung Alab Tower Station is a boon for birders and ornithologists keen to observe and study this species.

In addition to avian species, the adjacent trails provide an opportunity for nocturnal exploration in search of wildlife. The evenings are tranquil, punctuated only by the call of insects. On evenings graced with unobstructed skies, one can engage in astrophotography. Enthusiasts of macro photography will find the assortment of moths and insects particularly

captivating, as they congregate upon illuminated screens in a display reminiscent of bees swarming to nectar. Come dawn, this will serve as a feast for the birds.

The fact that Gunung Alab is located less than two hours from Kota Kinabalu International Airport with easy access all the way to the top, makes it a perfect location for a 'quick' day's bird watching, if time is limited. It also offers opportunities for extended birding with overnight stay and visits to nearby Tambunan and Trusmadi. Whether opting for a brief visit or an extended stay, visitors can enjoy a bird haven nestled in between two peaks of the highest mountains in Malaysia.

Acknowledgement

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References

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