

Birdwatching Hotspots Series:

Klias Peat Swamp Field Centre - An Oasis for Avian Enthusiasts

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Nestled in the heart of Sabah, Malaysia, lies the serene and biodiverse Klias Peat Swamp Field Centre, a hidden gem for nature lovers and wildlife enthusiasts. Spread over 3,600 ha, this unique ecosystem is home to a rich variety of flora and fauna, with a particular emphasis on an array of bird species. For the birders seeking the elusive swamp and mangrove species, Klias Peat Swamp Field Centre offers an unparalleled experience of avian diversity and discovery.

Peat swamp forests are a type of wetland characterized by a thick layer of organic detritus, comprising dead foliage and plant matter, which can be between four to 20 meters in depth. The water-saturated soils inhibit the complete decomposition of plant material, resulting in the accumulation of acidic peat with a pH ranging from 2.9-4. It takes thousands of years for peatlands to form, with organic matter accumulating at 0.5-2 mm per year. This process imparts a dark brown to black hue to the water, leading to the term 'blackwater swamps' (Bell 2014; MySabah.com 2011). It is estimated that 1.54 million hectares of peat swamp forests still remain. More than 70% of these peat swamp forests are in Sarawak, less than 20% in Peninsular Malaysia and the remainder in Sabah, especially at Klias (UNDP 2014).

Reaching Klias Peat Swamp Field Centre (Hutan Paya Gambut Klias) is an adventure in itself, ideal for exploring bird watchers, eager to immerse themselves in nature's embrace. The field centre is located just over a 100 km from Kota Kinabalu, the capital of Sabah in North Borneo (Plate 2). Travelers can opt for a scenic drive through picturesque landscapes, passing by quaint villages and fertile farmlands on the way to Klias.



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Plate 1: View of the Klias Peat Swamp and boardwalk

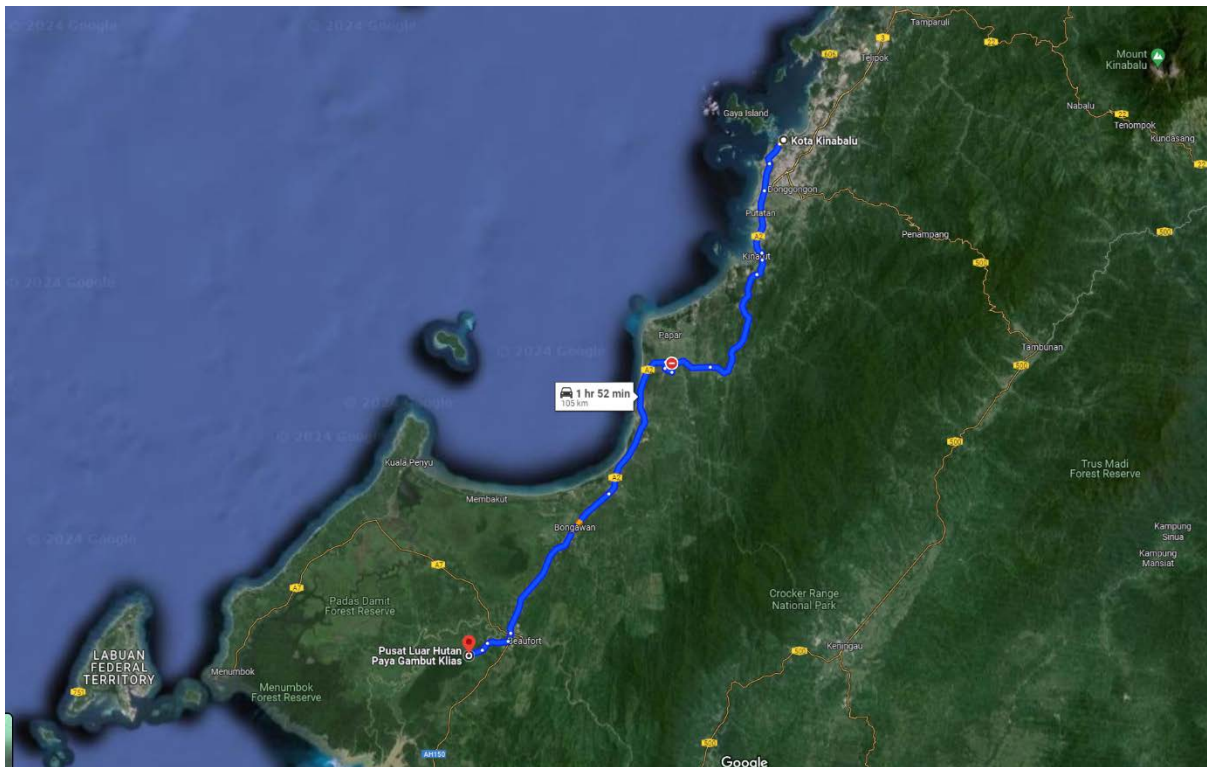


Plate 2: Location of and travel to Klias Peat Swamp Field Centre on Google Maps

Alternatively, for a more immersive experience, travellers can opt for train services. Trains run twice daily between Tanjung Aru and Beaufort. Experience nature along the way with no traffic disturbance. It takes about 2 hours or more as the train stops at every station such as Putatan, Kinarut and Papar before arriving at Beaufort.

Despite its secluded location, Klias Peat Swamp Field Centre offers a range of facilities designed to ensure a comfortable and enjoyable stay for birders. The accommodation options include a cosy hostel that can accommodate 16 to 30 people. The rooms are quite comfortable and equipped with air-conditioning (Plate 3). There are big male and female washrooms in the building. There is only a self-catering kitchen in the Field Centre and so bear in mind to shop for groceries at Beaufort town that's about 15 minutes' drive before reaching the centre.

At Klias Peat Swamp Field Centre, visitors are treated to a visual feast of lush greenery and vibrant wildlife. The peat swamp forest, with its unique ecosystem, is a haven for numerous plant species, including rare orchids, pitcher plants, and various ferns. The towering trees provide a natural canopy that shelters a diverse range of creatures, from tiny insects to majestic mammals.



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Plate 3: Accommodation at Klias Peat Swamp Field Centre

However, it is the avian population that truly steals the spotlight at this Class 1 protected Klias Forest Reserve. The wetland environment of the peat swamp is a prime habitat for a wide variety of bird species, making it a paradise for birdwatchers. A total of 246 species of birds are recorded from 266 checklists submitted to date on the eBird (2024) website. Visitors can expect to encounter colourful kingfishers, majestic hornbills, elusive owls, and graceful egrets among many others. The highlights will be the sought after non-descript bird, Hook-billed Bulbul *Setornis criniger* (Plate 4).

According to eBird, Hook-billed Bulbul is a highly localized species, found almost exclusively in the kerangas (Sundaland heath forests) and peat swamp forests of Borneo and Sumatra's lowlands. Rarely it is found in adjacent wooded habitats. The Hook-billed Bulbul is fairly plain overall with brown upperparts, off-white chest, a pale-yellow belly, and an elegant white supercilium (eyebrow). The long and heavy hook-tipped, silver bill is diagnostic, if seen well. It forages singly, in pairs, and in small bands, typically in the middle and lower levels of forest. There are a variety of including a harsh scolding call, a nasal "jyaw, jyaw" and a quicker, drier rattle.



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Plate 4: The less commonly seen Hook-billed Bulbul that inhabits peat swamps

Visitors are afforded the convenience of exploring the peat swamp forest without the necessity of traversing through mud and swamp, thanks to a 2.7 km wooden boardwalk (Plate 1). This boardwalk allows for an immersive experience in close proximity to the peat swamp ecosystem. The journey along this path is estimated to take approximately two hours, commencing just beyond the reception building.

Other notable birds along the boardwalk includes the scarce Scarlet-breasted Flowerpecker *Prionochilus thoracicus*, the Bornean or White-fronted Falconet *Microhierax latifrons* which is the smallest Raptors in the world, the secretive Grey-breasted Babbler *Malacopteron albogulare*, the brilliant Red-throated Barbet *Psilopogon mystacophanos* and the Scarlet-rumped Trogon *Harpactes duvaucelii* (Plate 6), to mention a few.



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Plate 5: Male Scarlet-breasted Flowerpecker

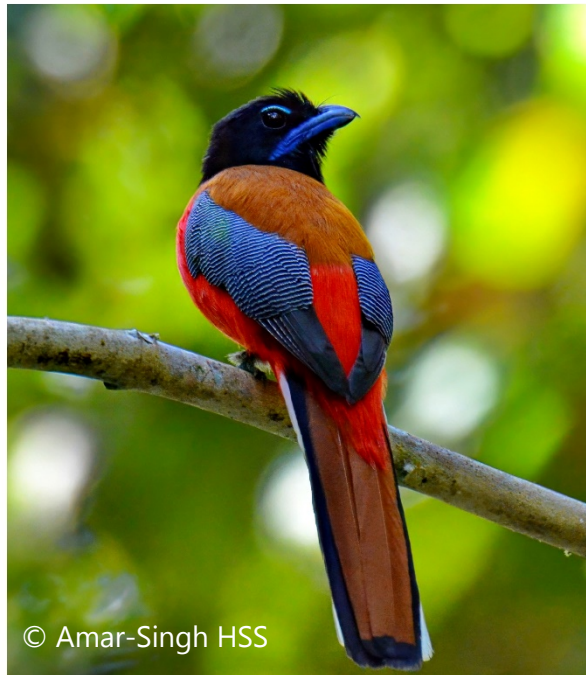


Plate 6: Male Red-throated Barbet (left) and male Scarlet-rumped Trogon

Acknowledgement

We would to thank Jason Bugay Reyes for the kind use of his images of the Klias Peat Swamp Field Centre.

References

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Citation: Pudín, R. & Amar-Singh HSS (2024). Birdwatching Hotspots Series: Klias Peat Swamp Field Centre - An Oasis for Avian Enthusiasts. *Malaysian Bird Report*. Volume 2/2024, June 2024: pg. 69-73.