

Articles

Birdwatching Hotspots Series:

Gunung Alab Bird Viewing Station – Unrestricted Access to Montane Birds

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We had previously written about the Gunung Alab Substation and Tower Station, a spectacular bird watching site (see reference). It was located at 1,900m ASL near the Telekom Tower at Gunung Alab Substation. In the last 6-9 months, a new bird viewing station has been established adjacent to the Gunung Alab Restaurant at 1660m ASL in the Crocker range. While lower than the previous site, the bird diversity and access are remarkable at the new site.

A drive from Kota Kinabalu city through the winding roads of Penampang will take you comfortably to Gunung Alab Bird Viewing Station within 1.5hrs. The viewing station is on the left of the restaurant with a sheer drop into a ravine. The site was established by KK Lee who is well-known, having started the original hide near the Telekom Tower at Gunung Alab Substation and the well-visited Trus Madi Forest Reserve hide.



Plate 1: Entrance to Gunung Alab Bird Viewing Station.

On this occasion KK Lee has changed the style of the 'hide', if it can be called that at all. There is no barrier between the birdwatcher/photographer and the birds. You are in a front-open, covered corridor, sheltered from the rain, and looking out at nature. You can sit or stand or walk about. The site can accommodate up to 30 individuals. He has invested in planting the appropriate bushes/trees that attract birds by their fruit and nectar. These also offer many natural perching sites. In addition, there are a number of white cloths and lights used to attract moths and insects overnight. Many bird species come very early to feed on these moths. Some mealworm feeding activities also take place.



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Plate 2: Inside the Gunung Alab Bird Viewing Station with open access to the birds and nature.

Due to the montane location, you are able to watch birds throughout the day and some species come at different times. Generally, it is good to arrive early in view of the moth feeding. Unlike many hides which are inaccessible to those who are elderly or disabled, this site is friendly. You can drive right up to the site, have seats, are sheltered from the rain and have good toilet access. You can also order a hot meal and drinks from the restaurant next door without having to leave. But note that often your meal may be interrupted many times by the arrival of new, exciting birds. There are plans to offer accommodation at the site and this may meet the needs of those travelling from long distances. Note that there is a payment to use the bird viewing station.

You are able to use your tripod while seated, but note that much of the photography is better done handheld. It is best to use a 100-600mm telephoto lens rather than a fixed 600mm or 800mm lens, as the birds come very close. Often no cropping of images is required and instead you are trying to move back to get the full bird in the camera view.



Plate 3: Images of some bird seen at Gunung Alab Bird Viewing Station (most uncropped) June 2025. Clockwise from top left: White-browed Shrike-Babbler, Golden-naped Barbet, Bornean Green-Magpie, Mountain Wren-Babbler, Temminck's Sunbird, Eyebrowed Jungle Flycatcher.

Some birds that are usually hard to observe or only seen fleetingly can now be seen at great length and this allows for better study of their plumage. There are many bird songs and calls but audio recordings are difficult due to the background conversation and noise.

KK Lee has two 'bird-spotters' who will move around and alert you as to the arrival of interesting new species. They are indispensable as you may be focused on a bird at one end

and another species turns up elsewhere. There was also a 'bird-dog' when we visited and he was bird sensitive.

According to eBird records, more than 150 checklists(!) have been submitted in 2025 alone (up to early August) with 110 species reported. A chart of the birds seen at the site is in the image below.



Plate 4: Chart of birds seen at Gunung Alab Bird Viewing Station.

Note that there are other birds to see outside the hide, just a little up the road to the substation; in particular the Bornean Shortwing and Snowy-browed Flycatcher.

In summary, this new bird viewing station is a spectacular location for any new or seasoned birdwatcher and photographer. It is also a great location to introduce birds to children and non-bird watchers, as you can watch birds 'naked-eye' and in comfort.

Acknowledgment

We would like to thank Jia-En Ho for reviewing the manuscript.

Reference

Amar-Singh HSS & Pudir, R. (2024). Birdwatching Hotspots Series: Gunung Alab Substation & Tower Station - Sub-Montane and Montane Birds 'Worst Kept Secret'. *Malaysian Bird Report*. Volume 2/2024, June 2024: pg. 64-68. <https://malaysianbird.report/wp-content/uploads/Sabah-Borneo-Gunung-Alab.pdf>

Citation: Amar-Singh HSS & Pudin, R. (2025). Gunung Alab Bird Viewing Station – Unrestricted Access to Montane Birds. *Malaysian Bird Report*. Volume 3/2025, Sept 2025: pg. 69-71.