

Birdwatching Hotspots Series:

Sungai Sedim Forest Eco Park: Home of the Hornbills

Choy Wai Mun

The first rays of the morning sun gradually crept over the forest revealing the true beauty of this lush landscape. An array of calls soon engulfed the Sungai Sedim Forest Eco Park and joining in the dawn chorus are the resident flock of White-crowned Hornbills *Berenicornis comatus*. There are not many places left in north western Peninsular Malaysia where the distinct territorial call of this enigmatic creature can still be heard. Thus, it comes as no surprise that this locality is a treasured commodity for the local birding community because not only one but at least four species of hornbills call it home. And hornbills are one of the most exhilarating and majestic birds to encounter in the wild.



The Sungai Sedim Forest Eco Park is located in the state of Kedah about 33 kilometers outside the township of Kulim and 130 kilometers from Alor Setar City. Spanning over 36,000 hectares within the Gunung Inas Forest Reserve and consisting of mostly lowland dipterocarp forest, it endures to be one of the best forest birding sites in this part of Peninsular Malaysia. It is open daily from 8:00 am to 6:00 pm and although admission is free, there will be additional charges for parking and the canopy walk. One can experience the world's longest rainforest canopy walk here which provides spectacular bird's eye views of the forest and river rapids directly below. Accommodations are available for those who wish to spend more time in this park and they range from camping facilities, dormitories to chalets.



Rainforest canopy walk © Choy Wai Mun



Forest Trails © Choy Wai Mun

There are a few well-marked trails for you to explore and discover the wonders of nature found within the borders. Along such trails is where you stand a good chance to encounter a remarkable family of birds known as trogons. The Scarlet-rumped Trogon *Harpactes duvaucelii* often perches unobtrusively among the foliage of the forest with only its distinct call as an indication of its presence. It may be the commonest of all the trogons but no small amount of effort and luck is required before you are able to marvel at this forest denizen.

The mighty Sedim River is fast-flowing and spectacular. Humans have taken advantage of this to make a living and this is one of few places in our country where commercial white-water rafting is available. Along isolated stretches and tributaries, a peculiar species of bird finds sanctuary in this turbulent habitat. The Chestnut-naped Forktail *Enicurus ruficapillus* has adapted to this semi-aquatic lifestyle and its striking plumage is not an uncommon sight.



Scarlet-rumped Trogon
© Choy Wai Mun



Sedim River © Choy Wai Mun



Chestnut-naped Forktail © Choy Wai Mun



The Orange-backed Woodpecker *Reinwardtipicus validus* may well be the largest of its kind to be found here and its size is rivalled by its beauty. The male, typical of birds, is exceptionally striking. And he will usually announce his arrival with a series of loud calls and powerful drumming. The Black-and-yellow Broadbill *Eurylaimus ochromalus* may be dwarfed by the former but what it lacks in size is made up by its charm and adorability. The insect-like territorial call is a common feature in the forest here but the minute size of the bird and its preference for the canopy level conceals its lovely colouration far too well.



Orange-backed Woodpecker © Choy Wai Mun



Black-and-yellow Broadbill © Choy Wai Mun

Patrolling in the skies above are predatory birds that keep the population of small animals in check. Unfortunately, only a handful of raptor species are recorded with any regularity. In the cover of darkness, nocturnal predatory birds do not fair any much better. Only the sinister silhouette of the Buffy Fish-Owl *Ketupa ketupu* routinely makes an appearance along the riverside forest.



Buffy Fish-Owl © Choy Wai Mun

The lower storey and undergrowth of the forest is the domain of a variety of babblers and no visit to this birding hotspot is complete without coming across this family of birds. Although babblers are vocal and usually occur in flocks, they are usually drably coloured and skilled at keeping out of sight much to the dismay of birders and bird photographers alike. Despite all the drawbacks they are fascinating birds and in the case of the Short-tailed Babbler *Pellorneum malaccense*, full of character too. Migratory birds also find refuge here in this rich ecosystem. During the wintering months, an influx of colours and beauty will further enhance the amazement of this locality. An alluring migrant known as the Yellow-rumped Flycatcher *Ficedula zanthopygia* is a common winter visitor to our shores and its arrival will hardly go unnoticed for it is a stunning species indeed.



Short-tailed Babbler © Choy Wai Mun



Yellow-rumped Flycatcher © Choy Wai Mun

Fruiting trees in season are a natural phenomenon which brings numerous feather gems out of hiding. The Sungai Sedim Forest Eco Park houses such trees and these annual occurrences are much anticipated as they can enrich your birding life like no other. Dozens of species, driven by gluttony, can congregate on a single tree in one morning. Among them are some of the most alluring forest species known to occur in Malaysia like the Scarlet-breasted Flowerpecker *Prionochilus*



Scarlet-breasted Flowerpecker © Choy Wai Mun

thoracicus. It is rare as it is beautiful and the fruiting trees provide the best means for observing and documenting this little feathered gem.

Bulbuls form the majority of the birds that patronize the fruiting trees here and sometimes as many as ten different species can be recorded. The colouration of bulbuls is certainly varied with the Buff-vented Bulbul *Iole crypta* sporting one of the duller plumages. At the other end of the spectrum is the Scaly-breasted Bulbul *Rubigula squamata*. And a flock of these mesmerizing birds at a fruiting is an experience to be cherished.



Buff-vented Bulbul © Choy Wai Mun



Scaly-breasted Bulbul © Choy Wai Mun

To end this little dedication to one of my favourite birding sites, is a plea. Illegal logging and wildlife trapping and as well as environmentally unfriendly recreational activities and businesses threaten to force Sungai Sedim Forest Eco Park to join the ranks of former birding sites that have disappeared in our time. Conservation of a natural heritage like this is more for the future generation and may they be able to continue witnessing the powerful flight of the charismatic hornbills.

The Sungai Sedim Forest Eco Park is located in the Gunung Inas Forest Reserve, 33 km from Kulim Town and 130 km from Alor Setar City. It comprises lowland dipterocarp forest. It opens daily from 8.00 am to 6.00 pm. Admission is free but there are charges for parking and the canopy walk. There is a resort near the site offering chalets, dormitory accommodation and camping facilities.

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