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Peninsular Malaysia and Sabah: Targeted clean-up tour

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Leader: Mike Nelson

Participant: Richard Clifford



Rail-babbler

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This custom tour of Peninsular Malaysia and Sabah, Borneo was designed for Richard to clean up some targets from his life list after previously visiting both areas. We started off in Johor with Rail-Babbler and Scarlet-breasted

Flowerpecker in a patch of peatswamp and worked our way up to Taman Negara, primarily for Garnet Pitta, for some nice lowland forest birding then back to Kuala Lumpur via Fraser's Hill for some highland birding and Mountain Peacock Pheasant, then over to Mount Kinabalu on Borneo for both endemic partridges. Overall we hit all of Richards targets with some fantastic views of many of the species.

We began in Johor on the afternoon in Pantii Forest. We had little time left in the afternoon but took advantage of what light we had left to try for Rail-Babbler and though we heard one close by we were not able to get any looks at it. This did give us the chance to establish where it was and would give it another crack the next morning.

We turned up again at Pantii this time before first light and made our way to the Rail-Babblers territory and waited. As the light began to come up we heard it singing quite close so waited peering down a clearing in the forest and a few minutes later it walked out into the open for some great views, Richard's last family done!

With this target off the list we continued to bird around the park finding another forest trail and a short distance in we heard another Rail-Babbler so set up to see if we could get a look at this one. Soon enough two birds walked past the clearer area in front of us. They disappeared behind some foliage on our left so we waited for a bit and that's when we could hear the soft *clucking* of a close bird and looking to our left we could see one just meters away walking along the forest floor. It stopped here and with its back bowed close to the ground it sang, inflating its blue throat sacs right in front of us. It was joined by another bird and they proceeded to walk towards a fallen tree so we followed to the other side of the huge felled tree and they shortly emerged this time joined by a third bird. They spent the next thirty minutes foraging and walking all around us, periodically singing. An amazing show to take in. Thrilled with these prolonged looks we spent the remainder of the morning birding the forest tracks picking up Banded and Rufous-collared Kingfisher and Purple-naped Spiderhunter.

The next day we headed to an area of peatswamp forest and after scouting round for a while found our main target in the form of a brightly coloured Scarlet-breasted Flowerpecker. As this was our main target it gave us time to head north to Taman Negara for the afternoon where we soon got to grips with Garnet Pitta perched up and singing, it sat here for a while before dropping to the forest floor and foraging close by. Since our main target was under the belt we had a more relaxing rest of the day to pick up some other species including Finsch's Bulbul and Green Broadbill.

The next day we began at Taman Negara with some amazingly close Rhinoceros Hornbills feeding almost at eye level in a fruiting tree near the entrance before we continued our journey and headed up into the hills.

We made a few stops at various patches of bamboo and on our third attempt we heard, then saw Bamboo Woodpecker. They drummed nosily on the hollow bamboo and flew back and forth a few times giving us some nice views. With this target nailed we headed up towards Fraser's Hill to bird round the roads where we could hear Bock's Hawk-Cuckoo. Our first try had one flying over our heads and disappearing into the forest not to be seen again. We could hear another calling closer to the main village and tried here just along the entrance road. This gave us the chance to see one flying in from farther away and take the birds *Accipiter* appearance. A nearby bottlebrush tree gave us great close looks at Streaked Spiderhunter too. We checked into our lodge then spent the remainder of the day walking the telecom loop. Here we enjoyed several mixed flocks that had some stunning birds like Silver-eared Mesia, Blyth's and Black-eared Shrike Babbler and Black-browed Barbet.

The next morning we began early, eventually hearing our target - Malaysian Partridge. The bird was quite close and eventually dropped down onto the road but as soon as it saw us it flew down the road and down the bank. After some tense waiting with it calling close by it popped up a bit farther behind us and cross the road again back up into the forest. Job done we headed to another trail and spent the rest of the morning hiking along here. Our best find was a group of four Himalayan Cutia that called and sang around us as we watched getting some great views of this often elusive species, along with a nice group of Malaysian Laughingthrush.

Our final morning in the peninsular was to find Mountain Peacock Pheasant. We showed up while it was still dark and proceeded to wait for first light. Thankfully we got here when we did as a group of noisy photographers came after us and set up their cameras. The birds though are a bit familiar with people now and soon enough a female and her chick came in to investigate and were soon joined by a rather boisterous male that would chase after her and flash all his purple and green ocellai at her before running off. She showed no interest and he soon gave up. It was then time to catch a flight across the South China Sea, to East Malaysia, basing ourselves on the lower flanks of Mount Kinabalu in anticipation for the following days birding.

The next day was spent along several mountain trails searching out our targets. First to show was Crimson-headed Partridge after several fruitless attempts. Though common on the mountain they are generally not easy to get views of but we eventually had a male pop up over a log right in front of us before scurry off up the ridge and onto the main trail. We proceeded back up and while trying to find it again Richard spotted a female sat motionless a bit farther up the trail. With a bit of coaxing we had the same male cross the path in front of us and walk down slope a bit giving us some nice looks. Along the main road we tried for Red-breasted Partridge and had a pair calling

down the slope below us but getting to a spot where we could see them was tough but one bird came close but it spooked before we managed to get a decent look at the bird. We got no more chances that day but were back the next day to try another trail.

Next morning we fared much better with a lovely Crimson-headed Partridge out in the open near the trail showing very well. This was soon forgotten about when a covey of Red-breasted Partridge began singing farther down the trail. We moved down to some cover next to the trail and waited. After a short while with the covey singing very close two birds popped through some foliage at the edge of the trail right in front of us but quickly turned and headed back in when they saw us. For the next few minutes the birds scurried around with the rest of the covey just up the slope from the trail before we moved back and let them cross. One remained on the other side, which lured them back across which allowed us repeated views. Having reeled-in the last of our targets we did some leisurely birding along the trail before heading back to the lodge to pack up and head down to Kota Kinabalu.



Crimson-headed Partridge and Scarlet-breasted Flowerpecker

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