

BIRDING HOTSPOT

Way Kambas National Park, Sumatra, Indonesia: the best Asian night-birding

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Introduction

Sumatra is the sixth largest island in the world and the largest island belonging entirely to Indonesia. The interior is dominated by two geographical regions, the Barisan Mountains in the west and swampy plains in the east. Once a completely forested island, Sumatra has suffered devastating habitat loss during the last fifty years and finding its highly sought-after speciality bird species necessitates a visit to its remaining original habitats, which are almost entirely to be found within national parks. Birders usually visit two such places. One of them is Kerinci-Seblat National Park situated in the Barisan Range, and the other is Way Kambas National Park in the lowlands.

Way Kambas is situated in the south-eastern part of the island in Lampung province. The park protects 130,000 hectares of lowland rainforest. However, the area was logged in the early 1970s

and traces of this damage are still visible, but it is still an excellent place to see the island's lowland specialities. In particular, Way Kambas is justifiably famous for its superb night-birding.

Logistics

Way Kambas lies about an hour and a half drive from the city of Bandar Lampung. Birders coming from Java find frequent ferries from the city of Merak to the small port of Tanjung Karang. From here reaching Bandar Lampung and the national park is relatively easy, either by taxi or by public transport. If you have first visited Kerinci-Seblat National Park, there are two options: either drive back to Padang (seven hours) and fly back to Jakarta, or find a driver keen enough to take you the thousand kilometres to Bandar Lampung. If you choose the latter it is worth considering that the road conditions allow an average speed of no more than 30 km per hour and the journey takes two whole days. Once in Bandar Lampung most local drivers usually know how to get to the park entrance. After dark, however, the park guards let no-one into the park owing to the occasional presence of dangerous wild elephants. A tidy state-run guesthouse is situated by the park entrance and can usually accommodate late arrivals. National park permits can also be bought there.

From the entrance the guards will normally take visitors to the elephant training centre. Be sure that they understand you want to go to Way Kanan and want to stay there in the bungalows, which are about 13 km from the entrance gate. The park staff will probably also insist that a warden has to stay with you inside the park. Our guide was the hilariously named "Daddy", who proved to be a great choice since he knows the key sites, does the shopping and cooks dinner. Food is basic but good, and bottled water, snacks and even beer can be purchased from Daddy. Accommodation is also basic but the guesthouse at Way Kanan is clean. Mosquito nets should be brought along; they are widely available at Bandar Lampung. Alternatively birders can opt to stay at the entrance gate and travel every morning to Way Kanan; this ride can be good for pheasants like Great Argus *Argusianus argus* and Crested Fireback *Lophura ignita*.

According to the rules of the park you must be accompanied by an armed guard while birding on

Plate 1. Way Kambas, July 2005.



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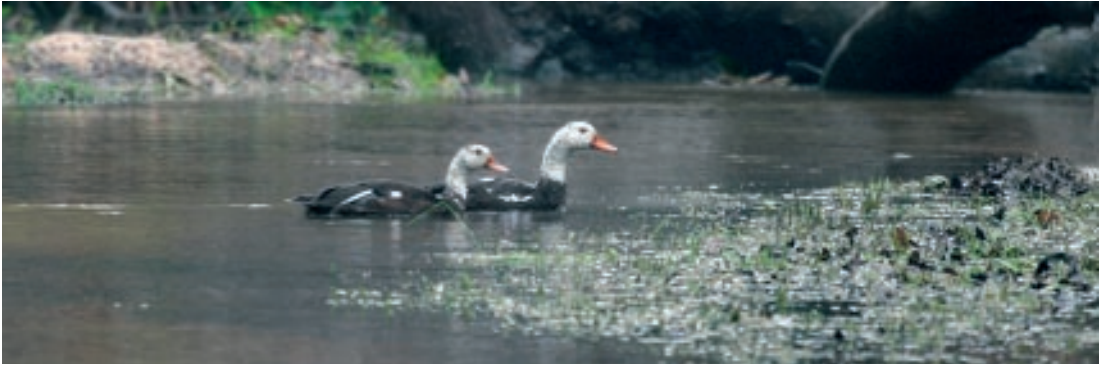


Plate 2. White-winged Duck *Cairina scutulata*, Way Kambas, July 2005.

Plate 3. Storm's Stork *Ciconia stormi*, Way Kambas, November 2006.

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Plate 4. Lesser Adjutant *Leptoptilos javanicus*, Way Kambas, July 2005.

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the trails (owing to the dangers of tiger and elephant); however, this is negotiable.

The best time to visit Sumatra and Way Kambas is during the northern summer. From July to September the weather is very hot and dry with an occasional heavy shower. This dry season is also the key to seeing some of the swamp specialities.

Birding

Way Kambas has a lot to offer for birdwatchers. Over 320 species of birds have been recorded in the park with several members of prized families like pheasants, broadbills, pittas, hornbills and frogmouths present. The main vegetation type is lowland dipterocarp rainforest, which is almost entirely secondary. Much swamp-forest, especially nibung swamps, are still to be found in more or less their original condition. These areas are probably the best place in the world to see White-winged Duck *Cairina scutulata*. In the dry season, when the water level is low, you have a good chance of finding these shy and wary birds. The most reliable areas have been in the Rawa Gajah (elephant swamp) swamps upriver from Way Kanan. Other swamp-forest specialities also present here include Storm's Stork *Ciconia stormi* and Lesser Adjutant *Leptoptilos javanicus*.

Grassy swamps, where you can scan for raptors and pigeons, frequently interrupt the wooded areas. The clearing around Way Kanan is particularly good for these birds and the best forest birding is usually along the main jeep track and the loop trail just around the guesthouse. Many species of kingfisher, broadbill, barbet, trogon, cuckoo and babbler can be found along the trails. The early mornings are best for birding as between 10h00 and 15h00 the bird activity is very low and the heat almost intolerable. When walking in the grasslands a hat is essential! Also be prepared for a lot of leeches on the trails. If you stop for any bird the forest floor literally starts to move towards you. Leech socks are very useful, and without them you might finish the day picking dozens of leeches off your body. Double-check your feet when you're on any elephant trail because the leeches are proportionate to the size of their target animals! The only almost completely leech-free trail is the main jeep-track.

For most birders, however, Way Kambas means the ultimate night-birding heaven in Asia! Not only the great variety of the otherwise scarce and hard-to-come-by species is what makes this national park world-famous but also the relative ease in finding them. Way Kambas is by far the most reliable site in the world for Large Frogmouth *Batrachostomus auritus* and the near-endemic Bonaparte's Nightjar *Caprimulgus concretus*. Other interesting nightbirds include Gould's *B. stellatus* and Sunda Frogmouths

B. cornutus, Oriental Bay Owl *Phodilus badius*, Reddish Scops Owl *Otus rufescens* and Malaysian Eared Nightjar *Eurostopodus temminckii*. All these targets can be found along the main jeep-track. Dusk is usually better for the nightjars and scops owls, while later in the night, especially around 22h00 and 04h30, is better for the frogmouths and Oriental Bay Owl.

If your time in Way Kambas National Park is limited we would suggest birding at the Way Kanan substation and concentrating on the main jeep track, the loop trail and the Rawa Gajah swamps.

Birdwatching spots within the park

Main jeep track: This is a 13-km dirt road from the entrance gate to the Way Kanan substation. It probably gives you the most productive birding especially in the early mornings. This is also the best area for night-birding and the last four kilometres are particularly good. Best birds: Crested Fireback, Great Argus, Crested Partridge *Rollulus rouloul*, Raffles's *Phaenicophaeus cholorphaeus*, Red-billed *P. javanicus* and Black-bellied Malkohas *P. diardi*, Oriental Bay Owl, Reddish Scops Owl, Large Frogmouth, Gould's Frogmouth, Sunda Frogmouth, Bonaparte's Nightjar, Scarlet-rumped Trogon *Harpactes duvaucelii*, Banded *Lacedo pulchella* and Rufous-collared Kingfishers *Actenoides concretus*, Red-bearded Bee-eater *Nyctyornis amictus*, Wrinkled Hornbill *Aceros corrugatus*, Red-crowned Barbet *Megalaima rafflesii*, Dusky *Corydon sumatranus*, Green *Calyptomena viridis* and Black-and-yellow Broadbills *Eurylaimus javanicus*, Banded Pitta *Pitta guajana*, Rail-babbler *Eupetes macrocerus*, Black-throated Babbler *Stachyris nigricollis* and Fluffy-backed Tit Babbler *Macronous ptilosus*.

Way Kanan substation: A nice clearing located 13 km from the main entrance gate along the Way Kanan river where basic accommodation is available. It is a superb place to look for over-flying birds like storks, raptors, pigeons, etc. Also in early morning it can be good for mixed species flocks. Best birds: Storm's Stork, Bat Hawk *Macheiramphus alcinus*, Black-thighed Falconet *Microhierax fringillarius*, Cinnamon-headed Green Pigeon *Treron fulvicollis*, Blue-rumped Parrot *Psittinus cyanurus* and Malaysian Eared Nightjar.

Loop trail: A 2-km circular trail which has one end at the Way Kanan substation and the other 150 m back along the main jeep track, good for ground-dwellers and doable in a few hours at birding speed. Best birds: Storm's Stork, Crested Partridge, Sunda Frogmouth, Red-naped Trogon *Harpactes kasumba*,



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Plate 5. Large Frogmouth *Batrachostomus auritus*, Way Kambas, July 2005.



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Plate 7. Bonaparte's Nightjar *Caprimulgus concretus*, Way Kambas, July 2006.

Plate 6. Gould's Frogmouth *Batrachostomus stellatus*, Way Kambas, July 2007.



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Rufous-collared Kingfisher, Red-crowned Barbet, Banded and Hooded Pittas *Pitta sordida*, Buff-rumped Woodpecker *Meiglyptes tristis*, Chestnut-backed Scimitar Babbler *Pomatorhinus montanus* and babblers generally.

Camp Dua: A few hundred metres downriver from Way Kanan substation. Best bird: White-winged Duck.

Rawa Gajah (elephant swamp): About 25 minutes upriver from the substation on the north side. In fact there are two Rawa Gajahs after each other, the second being the larger. These are seasonal wetlands that dry out in the dry season, becoming grassy, muddy clearings. Best birds: Storm's Stork, Lesser Adjutant, White-winged Duck, Grey-headed Fish Eagle *Ichthyophaga ichthyaetus*, Caerulean Kingfisher *Alcedo coerulescens*, Wrinkled Hornbill and Cinnamon-headed Green Pigeon.

Rawa Pasir (sand marsh): Located about an hour upriver from Way Kanan substation on the south side of the river. There is usually good bird activity on the forest edge around the marsh. Best birds: Storm's Stork, Lesser Adjutant, White-winged Duck.

Ulung-ulung Satu: This is a swampy lake on the south side of the river close to Rawa Pasir. Best birds: Storm's Stork, Lesser Adjutant, White-winged Duck.

Ulung-ulung Dua: This is another swampy lake about two hours upriver from Way Kanan substation. Though it is considered the most reliable site for Storm's Stork, it is difficult to access for most of the year. Best birds: Storm's Stork, Lesser Adjutant.

Way Kanan (Kanan River): The river by the substation, which runs into the Kambas river a few kilometres away from the substation. Best birds: Grey-headed Fish Eagle, Stork-billed *Halcyon capensis*, Blue-eared *Alcedo meninting* and Ruddy Kingfishers *H. coromanda*, Black-and-red Broadbill *Cymbirhynchus macrorhynchus*, Wrinkled Hornbill.

Bird specialities of Way Kambas

Storm's Stork *Ciconia stormi*

This rare, endangered stork occurs in the swampy areas. It is rather scarce and usually not easy to see. The best place is Ulung-ulung Dua but since it is only possible to visit this site in October (when it is driest) and with a guide, most birders don't go there. If you are lucky you might see one circling over one of the accessible swamps or along the Loop trail close to Way Kanan where it is sometimes seen on small forest pools.

Lesser Adjutant *Leptoptilos javanicus*

Another scarce and vulnerable stork which is normally possible to see in the swamps along the Way Kanan river.

White-winged Duck *Cairina scutulata*

This endangered duck is distributed from India to Sumatra but generally rare throughout its range. In Way Kambas, the most reliable place to see it, a population of about 30–50 birds is present, and the best time to look for it is in the dry season from July to October. Both Rawa Gajah and Ulung-ulung Satu, situated within 2–4 km of Way Kanan substation, are regular stake-outs, but getting good views of these wary birds is often difficult.

Oriental Bay Owl *Phodilus badius*

This widely distributed, superb-looking and much sought-after owl is one of the main prizes of night-birding in Way Kambas. The best place to search for it is along the main jeep track at night. Once you have located a calling bird it is usually not difficult to find, clinging to a vertical limb in the understorey.

Reddish Scops Owl *Otus rufescens*

This skulking forest owl occurs along the main jeep track and around Way Kanan substation. The best

Plate 8. Oriental Bay Owl *Phodilus badius*, Way Kambas, July 2005.





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Plate 9. Reddish Scops Owl *Otus rufescens*, Way Kambas, July 2005.

time is at dawn and dusk when it frequently calls, although finding it in the thick low understorey is usually a great challenge.

Large Frogmouth *Batrachostomus auritus*

The jeep track is probably the best place in the world to see this strange, spectacular bird. It is not uncommon and with some effort it is possible to find it. Just to hear its weird call is a great experience, but the moment you locate it in the mid-canopy will be one to remember for your whole life!

Gould's Frogmouth *Batrachostomus stellatus*

This is by far the most numerous of the three frogmouth species in Way Kambas and is usually easy to see.

Sunda Frogmouth *Batrachostomus cornutus*

This is probably the rarest and most secretive of the three frogmouth species in Way Kambas. It is best to listen for its distinctive whistle along the main jeep track but sometimes you have to wait long periods between calls and it is usually difficult to locate a calling bird in the canopy.

Bonaparte's Nightjar *Caprimulgus concretus*

Classified as Vulnerable by BirdLife, as it is a bird of lowland forests—a habitat in grave danger

throughout its range. It has a very strange, un-nighthjar-like and distinctive call, and once heard it is usually not too difficult to see this enigmatic bird.

Silvery Wood Pigeon *Columba argentina*

It is not entirely certain if this Critically Endangered bird really does occur in the park but recent unconfirmed sightings suggest it may be present. Definitely one to look out for.

Cinnamon-headed Green Pigeon *Treron fulvicollis*

Usually a difficult species anywhere, but easily found in Way Kambas and therefore a real speciality of the park.

Grey-breasted Babbler *Malacopteron albugulare*

This Near Threatened species of swamp-forests is rare and difficult to observe.

Rail-babbler *Eupetes macrocerus*

This shy ground-dweller, best located by its long whistle, is rare in Way Kambas, but seen on the Loop trail and along the main jeep track.

Conservation

Way Kambas is a unique place, a national park which is not primary forest having been logged until the 1970s, but it still serves as a very important refuge for many threatened lowland forest bird species. Lowland rainforests and wetlands are amongst the most threatened habitats in the world. Way Kambas has both. Birdwatchers can help Way Kambas National Park just by visiting it and contributing to the local economy, helping to highlight the importance of the long-term conservation of its fascinating and diverse habitats!

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