

## **Klias, Paya Maga, Ba'kelalan**

September 2019

I visited these three sites independently using a mixture of public transit, taxis, thumbed rides, and shared 4WD vehicles. I owe a huge thank you to Michael Kearns, from whom I got some great gen on all the transport and logistics for visiting Paya Maga and Ba'kelalan.

Essentially, public transit between Kota Kinabalu and Lawas is a pain and slow unless your timing works to take the once a day KK-Brunei bus and you aren't going to Klias. This didn't work for me, as I arrived too late for that bus AND wanted to go to Klias.

I got into Kota Kinabalu midday/early afternoon and immediately took a Grab (local equivalent of Uber) directly to Klias for 94 Ringgit as I recall. My first Grab driver wanted to add an additional fee for his return trip so I canceled the trip with him, second driver was happy to take me for the quoted price.

Klias has a basic dormitory and restrooms but no store, no restaurant, and no potable water. I took some water with me and winged it on food. In the end I convinced the park guard to make me some dinner and ended up with a serviceable meal, some of which I saved for a cold breakfast. Birding is from a boardwalk. For those overnighting at Klias, **Oriental Bay Owl** can be found just behind the dormitory at the start of the boardwalk and the guard said it's always there. The boardwalk makes a lollipop type loop, and **Hook-billed Bulbul** seems to be at the furthest point, on the loop itself, where the forest is taller. Closer to the entrance/park buildings the forest is lower and scrubbier. Apparently **Gray-breasted Babbler** hasn't been seen for some time, the better part of a year or so. I tried for it extensively and got no responses. I imagine it is still there but perhaps a case of people having bad luck or birds having moved further from the boardwalk. The reserve is large but as you are restricted to the boardwalk you are only birding a tiny fraction of it. The observation tower is useless though entertainingly leans to one side. All the Flowerpeckers I heard/saw were 30-40m up in the canopy in the tall forest area. If you want to try to ID the rare Flowerpeckers there, a scope is mandatory. I tried using a camera with 600mm lens and still couldn't really ID any of them. You should be able to get the Bulbul in an evening/morning without stress, but the Flowerpeckers and Babbler are harder.

The trick with Klias is how to get out. There is cel signal but you will never stumble on a taxi there, and there is no Grab/Gojek service there. It's near the end of a very little travelled dirt track through palm oil plantations. Because I had arrived via a Grab I didn't have a taxi driver's number to call to pick me up from Beaufort. Perhaps a better plan would be to Grab to Beaufort then use a local taxi so you can get the driver's number and arrange a pickup when you want to leave. Ultimately I got a ride with a park employee but I felt like that was a touch of luck. The

permanent duty ranger doesn't have a working car at the moment so it depends on the schedule of whoever does or doesn't show up each day.

Back in Beaufort, courtesy of a park employee, I took the last bus of the day going south, which leaves at 2pm from the Beaufort Bus Station. This bus only takes you as far as Sipitang. From Sipitang I got a local taxi to Lawas (60 Ringgit) and had the driver help me find the 4WD vehicles going to Ba'kelalan. I got to Lawas ~4pm and the 4WD finally left about 5:30-6:00, and worked out just fine. A seat in the shared 4WD was 25 Ringgit though it didn't seem a formal price. Very nice folks even if the driver had a good number of beers and was increasingly buzzed as the trip progressed. Getting to Long Tuyu took a long time with many stops to chat with friends, load and unload goods, drink beer, smoke, have pee breaks, etc, but we got to Long Tuyu about 8:30-9:00pm.

In Long Tuyu, ask for Mr Dawat. You can stay with him for 80 Ringgit with meals if you arrive too late to go to Paya Maga the same day. Mr Dawat will find you a porter and buy your food (eggs/rice/instant noodles kind of diet). He will also arrange your transport to/from the trailhead. Costs broke down like this for me:

Homestay of Mr Dawat - 80 myr  
Conservation fee - 10 myr  
Porter/cook - 100 /day  
Food - 50/ day  
Sleeping in the hut - 40 / night  
Transport to/from trailhead - 100 each way

We left the following morning around 7:30AM in a 4WD for the trailhead. I then hiked in slowly. Your porter can go ahead, the trail is easy to follow and the birding is excellent - it is very much worth hiking slow and birding on the way in. The trail is an old road and easy to follow except one spot where the trail gets overgrown and there are sticks forming an X across it. Just here there is a side path to the right. This goes through forest for 200-300m and pops back out on the overgrown old road, then you continue a short ways further to the hut. This side path winds around a bit and at least initially needs a touch of care to find/follow but you won't get lost and it's not terribly hard to follow.

Birding is excellent everywhere here - along the road into the trailhead, from the trailhead to the hut, and above the hut along the trail. Overall the best birding is probably from the trailhead to the hut, though two of the key birds, **Hose's Broadbill** and **Bornean Frogmouth**, are above the hut. Above the hut the trail is steeper and provides good birding (especially for the Broadbill and FM) for about 800m-1km until it gets a bit more overgrown, goes through some scrubby patches, and then gets even more overgrown. I never went more than about 1.4km from the hut, and didn't have any good birds past about 1km. **Black Oriole** is common from just below the hut until 1km+ above. I saw it every day without playback and estimated that there were at least 5-6 individuals in the area, probably more. They

were vocal all day and conspicuous. I had just one **Hose's Broadbill** about 500m above the hut, thankfully responsive to playback, though it took a fair amount of time to find one, and I never heard another. **Bornean Frogmouth** occurs from just near the hut up the trail for at least 1km. I heard it with frequency, though the typical experience was a bird that called once or twice and never again. I twice had more responsive birds. The first was downhill from me in terrain that was just not possible to get through, and I never could find a window through the vegetation to see the bird despite 2+ hours effort. The second was way uphill and I did some steep, reasonably adventurous bushwhacking to get to the bird but it was moving around and I probably also made too much noise and commotion as I suffered through rattan thickets. Again despite over 2 hours chasing it around I never saw it, and it eventually stopped calling. In three nights and mornings I invested about 10-12 hours and came away with the Frogmouth heard only. Perhaps I was a bit off season, and I did have a bit of rain, but it struck me as a pretty difficult bird.

I had nesting **Cream-eyed Bulbul** at 4.4379, 115.5297. I have a voice recording as well that I need to get uploaded to Xeno-canto.

I stayed three nights and thought it was a good amount of time to spend there as the birding was overall excellent and I enjoyed it tremendously despite a diet of greasy over-fried eggs and MSG laden instant noodles.

When I got back to Long Tuyo I waited by the road for a ride to Ba'kelalan. I sat down beside the road at noon and got a ride a bit after 2pm. In Ba'kelalan ask for the house/homestay of Julia and Sang. The basic plan is that the homestay is great and you can get early and late meals and all that, but the guiding/transport they provide is expensive and, in my experience, unreliable if it's not Sang himself. Sang is a school teacher, so during the week it will be a nephew of his most likely. The nephew had a not fully functional vehicle, was sick, slept instead of helping find birds, and then his replacement flaked completely the second morning.

For **Dulit Frogmouth** you'll need transport and given that it will be the evening, Sang should be available to guide so make sure he and not his nephew takes you around if possible. They have 2-3 territories, I got lucky and got it very quickly at the second territory we tried. The location I saw the bird at is a new territory that they found. I have not seen it published online so I won't publish it here. It is quite a ways further from town, so you will need transport anyways. For this bird I would recommend just going with Sang.

I found 3 **Bornean Frogmouth** territories too but they were all poor in terms of responding and were all far from the road, I didn't think I had any real chance of seeing any of them, but here are the territories:

Bornean FM #1 - 3.9432, 115.5961 - vocalized once here at dusk after playback and then never heard again

Bornean FM #2 - 3.9484, 115.6080 - this one was more vocal but way far away and never got terribly close

Bornean FM #3 - 3.9494, 115.6074 - responded some but was way downhill a miserably steep slope; I didn't fancy the descent.

For daytime birding it's ~5km from Ba'kelalan to the Bario Rd, then the road is steep and the forest has been cleared back from the dirt track further than necessary, resulting in a hot, steep, sunny road with just ok birding. I would decline guiding/4WD for this and just ask for a motorcycle ride up to whatever elevation you want to start walking back down from. There are a couple 50-100m stretches you'll have to walk up because the moto won't get up with two passengers. Bird your way down and then start walking back to town until you can thumb a ride. You can ask Julia for a box lunch from the homestay and then stay out all day. A lot of good birds occur along this road but I missed most of the daytime targets I was looking for – it was hot, windy, there was little activity, and it was difficult to get into the forest in most locations (just too steep).

To return to Lawas, I took the 25 minute flight (3x/week). Pre-booking is necessary as it tends to fill up and people wait at the airport for open seats as well. As soon as I arrived in Lawas (~11AM) I took a taxi directly to the bus station where I had time to get a bus directly back to Kota Kinabalu (buses leave at about noon). I inadvertently booked a minibus instead of a larger bus but this worked out much better – we arrived much faster than the large bus.

Costs at Ba'kelalan:

Homestay with meals – 90/day

Guiding - 200/day or 100/evening

4WD transport - 350/day or 150/evening

Moto ride up Bario Rd – 100 for the one time I did this, but this is too expensive, ask for 50 or find someone else in the village to do it.

One thing of note - I saw and heard Serpent-Eagles at both Paya Maga and Ba'kelalan. All of the birds I heard were Crested Serpent-Eagle. All of the birds I saw perched were Crested Serpent-Eagle, assuming the ID criteria put forth in field guides are correct. I get the impression that Mountain/Kinabalu Serpent-Eagle may be a frequently strung bird. I would not assume that any Serpent-Eagle seen there is Mountain/Kinabalu unless you get a great look at a perched bird or clearly hear a bird.

Slowly but surely a few trip reports are coming out for these sites, but there is not a ton of info on how to do it independently, so I hope this helps someone at some point. More information on what birds occur where can be gleaned from other reports and from eBird, so I just focused on the logistics here. Any questions, please feel free to get ahold of me!

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