

# SULAWESI & KOMODO

July 6 to 19, 2024

*Wildlife Treks Komodo Dragons  
Mesmerizing Waters*

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## TRIP REPORT



CHEESEMANS' ECOLOGY SAFARIS

Photo: Grace Chen



# ABOUT THE TRIP



Our July 2024 Sulawesi and Komodo expedition, led by naturalist Charlie Ryan, was an unforgettable journey through Indonesia's rich biodiversity. Starting in Tangkoko National Park, we encountered rare species like the Celebes Crested Macaques and Sulawesi Knobbed Hornbill. We even participated in a rare leatherback sea turtle hatchling release. The trip continued to Komodo National Park, where we marveled at the legendary Komodo Dragons and snorkeled in vibrant coral reefs, spotting manta rays, three species of sharks, and two species of sea turtles. Each day brought new discoveries, making this adventure a true celebration of Indonesia's unparalleled natural beauty.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS



**3**

TRIP OVERVIEW

**10**

MAMMALS

**12**

BIRDS

**16**

REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS

**18**

OTHER

**22**

MORE INFO



Knobbed Hornbill

Photo: Grace Chen





# TRIP OVERVIEW

## JULY 8, 2024

### Manado Airport - Tangkoko National Park

It was time to start the Sulawesi adventure! Everyone arrived and we made the driving journey to Tangkoko National Park, situated between 4 volcanoes and facing the Molluca Sea. Everyone was keen for some activities, so we got ready and headed in for our first visit to explore the diverse ecosystem of Sulawesi's coastal forests. Upon entering the park, the endemic and beautiful black-crested macaques were waiting to greet us. Troop 1's territory is the front of the park, and they have several favorite sleeping trees near the parking lot of the national park. A highlight of our first experience was getting a very rare opportunity to release leatherback sea turtle hatchlings into the sea, as led by local rangers. An incredible experience that very few people have been able to experience globally. As we continued on our walk, Maddy and Mensur, our local guides, worked hard to point out a few bird species, but overall the forest was a bit quiet due to the overcast weather. Even Alfred Russell Wallace, the pioneering naturalist who spent extensive time in Sulawesi and developed here his contributions to the theory of natural selection, had a few quiet days. We knew tomorrow would bring more discoveries.

## JULY 9, 2024

### Tangkoko National Park

As we rose early, we entered the park and started walking towards a known Sulawesi Knobbed Hornbill nest site in hopes of seeing the male or female cleaning the nest in preparation for the nesting. Along the way, we saw our first Green-backed Kingfisher (female), which was very cooperative and allowed everyone to get some great views. A few steps further and the male was sitting on a low branch. It also just stayed sitting for us to enjoy. Because of the lack of predators, forest-dwelling species in Tangkoko are not afraid of humans and allow for very close and clear sightings. Along the way, we had our first sighting of a spectral tarsier that was sitting on the outside of a strangling fig as we approached. Incredible to see such a unique species. Our patience at the hornbill nest site did not pay off this morning. There was so much hornbill activity in the surrounding forest, but none wanted to visit the nest hole. We decided to come back and check another day. Mensur managed to find an Ochre-bellied Boobook, so we traversed the foothills to where it was sitting in a low branch. By us maneuvering to find the right position, everyone got some great looks at this cute owl. We returned to the park in the afternoon and explored the areas nearer to the park entrance because the weather was threatening rain. At the field, we got great views of Yellow-billed Malkoha, White-faced Cuckoo Dove, Sahul Sunbird, Purple-winged Roller, and Sulawesi Drongo to name a few.

## JULY 10, 2024

### Night Walks and Nocturnal Wonders

This morning we embarked on small boats and followed the coastline to explore the mangroves up the coast. Along the way, we had sightings of White-bellied Sea Eagle, Brahminy Kites, and a cooperative Collared Kingfisher. Near the caves on the rocky coast, we saw the Great-billed Kingfisher, which was one of the main targets to see of all of the endemic kingfishers of this region. The tide was high so we could easily enter the mangroves. Some of the birds we saw were Sulawesi Triller, Pink-necked Green Pigeons, Pied Imperial Pigeons, and we heard the interesting call of Channel-billed Cuckoos. We came back and everyone was still up for activity, and this attempt on the Knobbed Hornbill was a success! We had a lucky bonus of a Ruddy Kingfisher waiting for us at the parking lot along the small river. On the trail to the nest, we encountered 5 bear cuscus, and everyone got clear views as this nocturnal species rested in the trees. Finally we arrived at the hornbill nest. After 15 minutes of waiting, the beautiful male came in and spent about 1 minute inspecting the nest hole and doing some cleaning. What an incredible view to watch such a stunning hornbill species on a nest hole! On the way back, we were treated to our first look at the Lilac Kingfisher, another endemic. In the afternoon, we continued back into the park for more exploration. In the afternoon, the weather was looking like rain so we focused near the entrance again. We picked up another Lilac Kingfisher, Great-billed Parrots in flight, and had a great view of a group of Yellow-billed Malkohas. We waited at the tarsier tree further into the forest and watched the small family wake up and leave for the evening to terrorize their prey. Even though there was quite a few people at the tree, it was still amazing to have clear views and watch them for over an hour. Our walk back to the lodge was wet with heavy rain, giving us a true tropical rainforest experience. It didn't deter us from animal watching and we were able to see some cool amphibians and earth tarantulas. After dinner, some of us called in a Sulawesi Scops Owl which was very cooperative. It came in fast and then sat on the same open branch until we went back to the rooms. Great to see another owl species that is endemic to the island.

## JULY 11, 2024

### Morning with Sulawesi Dwarf Hornbill and Dwarf Kingfisher

This morning we focused on the hilly area of Timbuan. The bird activity was great and we added a lot of beautiful species to our list. From our first stop, we had great views of Sulawesi Knobbed Hornbill, White-necked Mynas, Yellow-breasted Racket-tail, Fiery-browed Mynas, Sulawesi-hanging Parrots, White-rumped Triller, and more. We started to walk along the road and saw some other beautiful species, including White-bellied Imperial Pigeon, Grey-sided Flowerpecker, Black-sided Flowerpecker, and a large group of Knobbed Hornbills. On a quick stop on the way down the hill, we finally all got to see the Sulawesi Dwarf Hornbill which we had been looking for. While watching the hornbill, a few of us saw a Sulawesi Serpent Eagle flying through the valley. Next stop, find the Sulawesi Dwarf Kingfisher. We came back down to near Tangkoko Hill and entered a small trail that goes through farmland. The guides quickly found the Sulawesi Dwarf Kingfisher, but by the time we got there it had flown again. After more searching, find again, and then it flies, and then we find. This went on for about 30 minutes but eventually everyone got a good look at it and some photos. Since 2 people had missed the leatherback release, we arranged to release 3 more turtle hatchlings in the afternoon, which the park rangers helped us make possible.

# JULY 12, 2024

## Birding and Biodiversity

This morning some people went for a boat trip to look for dolphins. Unfortunately, the dolphins decided they didn't want to be in this area today, but the boat ride was still beautiful (although roly with the ocean swell) and some flying fish were spotted. The people that went into the park focused mostly on getting better photos of Green-backed Kingfisher, Lilac Kingfisher, and we spent more time with the black-crested macaques as the troop was sitting in a nice patch of forest. We all packed up and had lunch before departing back to Manado. Our last stop for birding in Timbuan was hampered by rain, which pushed us back into the vehicle and on the road back to Manado. Dinner this night was fun to try all the different local dishes, and eat some excellent fish with some incredibly spicy dabu dabu (a chile paste with lots of variations). The most flavorful is the one that is cooked in coconut oil, which brings the sweet flavor of coconut, followed by intense heat from the chilis!

# JULY 13, 2024

## Arrival at Komodo National Park

An early departure from the Novotel started us on our 7-hour journey and 3 planes to arrive in Komodo National Park. The travel day went smoothly and we arrived at Sebayur Besar island and got settled into Komodo Resort. Our first snorkel on the house reef was incredible and teeming with schooling fish. The speed they change colors is an amazing animal trait to view.

# JULY 14, 2024

## Up Close with Komodo Dragons

After breakfast, we headed out to two snorkel locations - Sebayur Kecil Island and Sebayur Rock. Seabayur Kecil had an incredible hard coral garden that extended as far as the eye could see. Conditions were calm and the water clarity was at least 60 feet. There were some big triton triggerfish swimming across the reefs throughout the snorkel. When we finished our snorkel, we switched to Sebayur Rock and were treated to many more fish in the water and a nice combination of hard and soft corals. Aldo, the snorkeling guide, found a scorpion fish, which was very cool to see how well camouflaged they are in the environment. After returning to the resort for lunch, we set out to search for the infamous Komodo dragons on Rinca Island. We managed to see 4 different dragons, including a mating pair. Watching these prehistoric reptiles is an experience that gives most people a real visceral feeling! From Rinca, we departed to Kalong, a small mangrove island off of the coast of Flores. As sunset approached and the island flying foxes emerged, everyone was left in awe as the sky became filled with thousands of fruit bats with wingspans up to 4 feet. The sky turned bright orange and the sight of thousands of bats on the burning sunset was breathtaking. It is interesting that these fruit bats do not use sonar like most bat species, and rely on eye sight for finding food.

# JULY 15, 2024

## Snorkeling and Wildlife in Komodo's Reefs

We set off on the speedboat to explore Komodo Island this morning. We first started walking and a green jungle fowl greeted us just off the beach. It is so cool to see the 'OG chicken' in its native habitat. Red jungle fowl are found throughout Asia, but the green junglefowl is restricted from Bali heading east into the Lesser Sunda islands. In our search for more dragons, we got good views of Yellow-crested Cockatoos, Golden Whistler, Spice Imperial Pigeon, and a few more. When we were walking back, we had great looks at a male and female Komodo dragon at the watering hole. It was nice that there weren't other people around so we got to spend a nice amount of time observing them. We had lunch at the beach, and then continued by boat to Makassar Reef. A highlight of the drifting was seeing a cowtail ray right before getting back on the boat. We jumped in twice and let the strong current fly us across the reef while searching for mantas. Unfortunately today, no mantas came to say hello so we packed up and moved over to Tattawa Besar, a small island with an incredible reef. First jump in, some were swept into the current so we reorganized, re-positioned and tried again. The reef and fish life here were amazing. There were tons of reef sharks, big schools of fusiliers, and a number of green sea turtles. It was our best snorkel site yet and we still had a few days! We returned back to Komodo Resort and some opted to head out for a afternoon snorkel on the house reef which is always filled with life. And then a few of us went to the top of the hill to do some sunset photography. The sky didn't disappoint, with intense yellows, oranges, reds, and purples with volcanoes silhouetted in the distance.

# JULY 16, 2024

## Dragons and Dramatic Landscapes

This morning we headed for Padar Island in the south of Komodo National Park. We saw some Crested Terns and Whiskered Terns along the way feeding in the shallow reef and sand patches. We had a nice walk and took in an amazing view of the islands below. I think everyone learned what it is like to be a social media influencer as the selfie game was strong at the top! We finished up and then headed towards Makassar Reef. After checking around and seeing no mantas from the surface, we made our way towards Turtle City at the island of Siaba Besar. The very shallow (sometimes almost too shallow) reef was a perfect place for careful snorkeling. The corals close to the water's surface were so vibrant and you could look closely into anemones and have the clown fish just in front of your face. Even though the snorkeling site is called "Turtle City", we only saw one turtle on this snorkel session. In the afternoon, people took a rest and then we met at dusk to head out for a night snorkel. Snorkeling at night is such an incredible experience and so different than the daytime. Some of the cool creatures that we saw included decorator shrimp, morey eels, a bamboo shark, an octopus and tons of cool large hermit crabs.



# JULY 17, 2024

## The Hidden Gems of Komodo

We made our third trip to Makassar Reef, leaving earlier at 7:30am. As soon as we arrived we could see a manta ray feeding on the surface and the excitement kicked in. We spent 20-30 minutes swimming with the manta, watching it glide along the surface and make periodic turns and spins. We also were able to snorkel with another manta that showed up near the end of this half hour. Once other boats caught on to what we were doing, I was happy everyone was agreeable to leave the craziness and head for our next spot. We moved to a snorkel site called Matt's Wall, and personally I think that this was the best reef that we snorkeled on. The reef was in perfect condition, the fish life was overwhelming, and we had great turtle (hawksbill and green) sightings and seeing a large eagle ray coming off the top reef was a real highlight. One of the other impressive sightings was a adult Napoleon wrasse which is a beautiful fish and the rarity of larger specimens these days. We came back to the resort for lunch and had another afternoon dive on the north side of the house reef in near perfect conditions. The water was so clear and the fish were so abundant. There was another eagle ray, a white-tipped reef shark, and plenty of fish.

# JULY 18, 2024

## Reflections and Farewell Dinner

It is always nice to do a sunrise snorkel and today was no different. In the early morning, fish have just started their morning feeding and the activity is always so busy. The large schools of fish were everywhere, and I always enjoy watching the large school of adult batfish that live under the jetty. We packed our bags, and headed to the airport after an incredible journey.



# MAMMALS

## Tangkoko National Park, Sulawesi, Indonesia

- Black crested macaque
- Spectral tarsier
- Sulawesi dwarf squirrel
- Sulawesi rousette
- Sorest short-nosed fruit bat

## Komodo National Park, Kalong Island, Rinca Island, Sebayur Island, Indonesia

- Timor deer
- Indonesian wild boar (banded pig)
- Water buffalo
- Long-tailed macaque
- Island flying fox



Black Crested Macaque

Photo: Grace Chen



A close-up photograph of a Collared Kingfisher perched on a tree branch. The bird has a long, sharp black beak, a white throat, and a blue collar around its neck. Its body is primarily yellowish-brown, with bright blue wings and tail. The background is a lush green forest with large, vibrant leaves.

# BIRDS

Collared Kingfisher

Photo: Grace Chen



## **Tangkoko National Park and Timbuan, Sulawesi, Indonesia**

- Philippine Megapode
- Sultan's Cuckoo-Dove
- White-faced Cuckoo-Dove
- Stephan's Dove
- Barred Dove
- Pink-necked Green Pigeon
- White-bellied Imperial-Pigeon
- Green Imperial-Pigeon
- Pied Imperial-Pigeon
- Lesser Coucal
- Yellow-billed Malkoha
- Black-billed Koel
- Brush Cuckoo (Sulawesi)
- Glossy Swiftlet
- Uniform Swiftlet
- Pacific Swift
- Gray-rumped Treeswift
- Barred Rail
- Kentish Plover
- Common Sandpiper
- Gray-tailed/Wandering Tattler
- Tern sp.
- Greater Frigatebird
- Pacific Reef-Heron
- Sulawesi Serpent-Eagle
- Sulawesi Hawk-Eagle
- Brahminy Kite
- White-bellied Sea-Eagle
- Sulawesi Scops-Owl
- Ochre-bellied Boobook
- Knobbed Hornbill
- Sulawesi Hornbill (Dwarf)

- Sulawesi Dwarf-Kingfisher
- Sulawesi Lilac Kingfisher
- Ruddy Kingfisher
- Sacred Kingfisher
- Collared Kingfisher
- Green-backed Kingfisher
- Purple-winged Roller
- Ashy Woodpecker
- Yellow-breasted Racquet-tail
- Great-billed Parrot
- Azure-rumped Parrot
- Ornate Lorikeet
- Sulawesi Hanging-Parrot
- White-rumped Cuckooshrike
- White-rumped Triller
- Common Cicadabird
- Black-naped Oriole (Sulawesi)
- White-breasted Woodswallow
- Sulawesi Drongo
- Pale-blue Monarch
- Slender-billed Crow (Sulawesi)
- Pacific Swallow
- Sooty-headed Bulbul
- Sulawesi Babbler
- Finch-billed Myna
- Asian Glossy Starling
- Sulawesi Myna (Crested)
- White-necked Myna
- Rusty-backed Thrush
- Yellow-sided Flowerpecker
- Gray-sided Flowerpecker
- Sahul Sunbird
- Black-faced Munia
- Eurasian Tree Sparrow

## **Komodo National Park, Kalong Island, Rinca Island, Sebayur Island, Indonesia**

- Pied Bushchat
- Collared Kingfisher
- Great-billed Heron
- White-bellied Sea Eagle
- Brahminy Kite
- Whiskered Tern
- Crested Tern
- Lemon-bellied White Eye
- Black-sided Flowerpecker
- Tenggara Whistler
- Flores Spangled Drongo
- Orange-footed Scrubfowl
- Green Junglefowl
- Ornate Sunbird
- Yellow-crested Cockatoo
- Green Imperial Pigeon
- Japanese Sparrowhawk
- Zebra Dove
- Eastern-collared Dove
- White-breasted Woodswallow
- Sunda Pygmy Woodpecker
- Black-naped Monarch
- Osprey
- Peregrine Falcon
- Zebra Finch
- Eurasian Tree Sparrow



# REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS

**Komodo National Park,  
Kalong Island, Rinca Island,  
Sebayur Island,  
Indonesia**

- Komodo dragon
- Leatherback turtle
- Green sea turtle
- Hawksbill sea turtle

**Tangkoko National Park,  
Sulawesi, Indonesia**

- Draco flying lizard
  - Gecko
- Puddle toad

Komodo Dragons

Photo: Grace Chen



# OTHER

**Tangkoko National Park, Sulawesi, Indonesia**

- Earth tarantula
- Swallowtail butterfly
- Yellow-tailed birdwing butterfly
- Wood nymph
- Huntsman spider

# FISH & CEPHALOPOD

**Komodo National Park, Kalong Island, Rinca Island, Sebayur Island, Indonesia**

- Manta ray
- Eagle ray
- Cow-tailed ray
- Blue spotted ray
- Blacktip reef shark
- Whitetip reef shark
- Many species of tropical reef species including clownfish, lionfish, moray eel, Napoleon wrasse, parrotfish, triggerfish, damselfish, angelfish, unicorn fish, giant trevally, barracuda, stonefish, pufferfish, octopus, cuttlefish, nudibranch, sea cucumber, mantis shrimp, and many more

Green Sea Turtle

Photo: Charlie Ryan





Manta Ray

Photo: Charlie Ryan



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Spectral Tarsier

Photo: Grace Chen



THANK YOU

