

# IN SEARCH OF WILDLIFE IN SULAWESI



**Ir. Chin Mee Poon**

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**S**ulawesi is one of the largest among the 13,000 plus islands that make up the archipelago of Indonesia. It not only has some very intriguing indigenous cultures for visitors to experience, there is also very unique wildlife in its waters and forests.

When my wife and I were backpacking in Sulawesi in September last year, we spent much time looking for the island's flora and fauna.

After spending some time in Tana Toraja in the northern part of Sulawesi Selatan to experience a taste of the extremely fascinating culture of the people there, we went further north into Sulawesi Tengah and eventually settled in the idyllic Togean Islands within the large Tomini Bay. During our short stay on one of the islands, we met some interesting people from several European countries and visited some beautiful beaches, but the most rewarding part must be the time I spent snorkelling in a serene and charming lake, Danau Mariona. There are thousands of stingless jellyfish in the small lake and I had so much fun

swimming with them. Ecologists believe the jellyfish lost their stinging cells through evolution because they live in a confined ecosystem without predators. There are 2 other stingless jellyfish lakes in Indonesia: On Kakaban Island, one of the Derawan islands off the east coast of Kalimantan, and Lenmakana Lake in Misool Island in Raja Ampat, West Papua. Worldwide, there are 10 other such jellyfish lakes and they are found in Palau, the Philippines and Vietnam.

A 12-hour overnight ferry ride took us from Togean Islands to Gorontalo in the northern arm of Sulawesi Island. From there we got to the Visitors Centre of Bogani Nani Wartabone National Park near Doloduo, and we put up a night in a very spacious but mosquito infested guest room in the Centre. We engaged a ranger to be our guide for wildlife viewing in the park the following morning. In 4 hours of walking, we only saw half a dozen black macaques and a few knobbed hornbills high up in the forest canopy as well as several small lizards and other insects. Many beautiful fan palms made the forest quite attractive though.

The highlight in our search for Sulawesi's wildlife came towards the end of our trip when we were exploring the Minahasan Highlands in the north-eastern tip of the island. After visiting the other attractions there, we finally came to the tiny hamlet of Batu Putih and spent 2 nights in a homestay. Led by a woman guide introduced to us by the homestay owner, we did 2 walking safaris in the Tangkoko Reserve adjacent to the hamlet; the first lasted for a little more than 6 hours from 6.30 a.m. and the second from 4.00 p.m. to 7.00 p.m. We saw black macaques, a few unidentified birds foraging among the thick foliage, tiny flying lizards on tree trunks, a family of 3 owls resting on low branches, a pretty kingfisher, several Sulawesi bear cuscus (a species of arboreal marsupial endemic to Sulawesi and nearby islands) on high branches and a beautiful knobbed hornbill feeding its month-old chick safely shielded in a hole high up a large tree trunk.

We also saw liana flowers and fruit for the first time in our years of exploring tropical rainforests. At dusk, we saw half a dozen tarsiers emerging from their dens in a tree trunk of strangling fig, to hop from tree trunk to tree trunk, hunting for insects. We also saw 2 large tarantulas and a sunbird sleeping between 2 leaves.

I was absolutely satisfied with our wildlife viewing endeavours in Sulawesi. ■