

## ORNITHOLOGY OF THE KELABIT HIGHLANDS OF SARAWAK, MALAYSIA

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**ABSTRACT.** — The Kelabit Highlands played a key role in the development of modern Bornean ornithology. The Highlands consist of a plateau at 1000–1200 m with substantial wet rice paddy and surrounding taller mountains. These physical features lead to an unusual combination of montane, lowland, and migratory birds. This avifauna was studied in the 1940s to 1950s by two ornithologists whose collaboration helped usher in the modern era of Bornean ornithology: Tom Harrisson of the Sarawak Museum and Dean Amadon of the American Museum of Natural History. We examine their collaboration and explain how these men contributed to Bertram Smythies' milestone book, *The Birds of Borneo* (1960). Although the roles of Harrisson and Smythies in Bornean ornithology are well known, the contribution of Dean Amadon is not generally appreciated, and we clarify it. In the process, we also consider modern work on the Kelabit avifauna, including our own expedition in 2011, and the current status of Kelabit birds and issues relating to their conservation and potential for further study.

**KEY WORDS.** — Bertram Smythies, bird, Borneo, collection, Dean Amadon, Montane forest, Tom Harrisson

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### INTRODUCTION

The Kelabit Highlands region of Sarawak is second only to Mt. Kinabalu in its importance to the history of Bornean ornithology. The geography of the region—a high-elevation plateau with wet rice cultivation surrounded by mountains—leads to an unusual mixture of lowland, montane, and migratory birds. But unlike Mt. Kinabalu, the historical importance of the Kelabit Highlands derives less from geography than from serendipity. The vagaries of World War II caused budding ornithologist and anthropologist Tom Harrisson to visit this remote, little known region. He began collecting specimens and life-history data of Kelabit birds as a paratroop officer near the end of the war, and he maintained a particular interest in the ornithology of the region until about 1960 (Harrisson, 1949a, 1959b, 1960). As curator of the Sarawak Museum (1947–1966), Harrisson published regularly on Kelabit birds in the *Sarawak Museum Journal*, and he encouraged forester Bertram Smythies to prepare a Bornean bird checklist (Smythies, 1957) and a handbook, *The Birds of Borneo* (Smythies, 1960), that extensively featured

his Kelabit bird records. The importance of Harrisson's data to Smythies' two books is evidenced by reference to Kelabit birds in virtually every account of highland species, and many accounts of migrants and shorebirds.

But the role of the Kelabit Highlands in the development of Bornean ornithology is more interesting than simply Smythies' use of Harrisson's observations. At the end of World War II, Bornean ornithology was in flux. Although birds of coastal and riverine areas and Mt. Kinabalu in North Borneo were well known (e.g., Whitehead, 1893; Chasen & Kloss, 1930; Banks, 1937), birds of the interior were poorly understood, and taxonomic issues relative to almost all native species were in need of review. In the 15 years after the war, Harrisson pushed hard to solve many of these problems. He encouraged expeditions to unexplored inland areas, such as the Usun Apau plateau (1955) in Sarawak, and Mts. Trus Madi, Meliau, and Magdalena (1956) in Sabah (Smythies, 1957, 1960; Sheldon et al., 2001). He also enlisted the help of prominent ornithologists at museums around the world to work on specific taxonomic issues because of a lack of