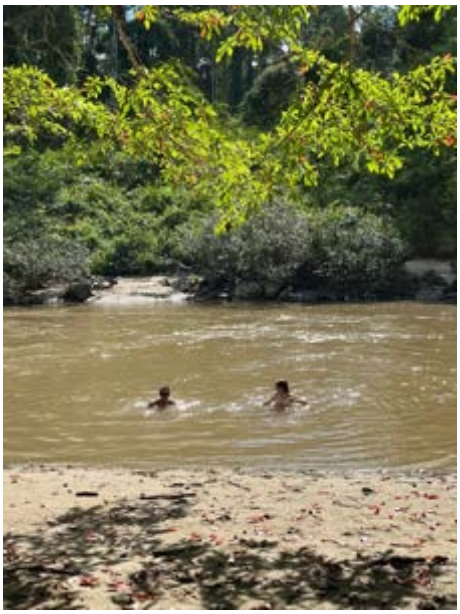
Thanks to the George Brendon Travel Prize fund, I was able to travel to Borneo for two weeks in May 2024, as part of a travel course for my undergraduate Biology degree. I was fortunate enough to be accepted for this travel course to study tropical forest ecology in the most biodiverse place on Earth. After a long journey which involved a flight to Kuala Lumpur, a layover in Kota Kinabalu, another flight in a small propellor plane and a two-hour jeep ride, we arrived at the Danum Valley Field Station in Sabah, Borneo. The field station is located in one of the best-protected and most significant areas of lowland forest in Southeast Asia. Much important conservation work has been carried out in the area, overseen by the South East Asia Rainforest Research Partnership.

Over the course of the trip, I had the opportunity to exposure different subsets of flora and fauna with leading experts in those fields, many of whom had been visiting and working in Danum Valley for decades. We hiked through the rainforest for hours each day, sometimes visiting sites of ongoing research projects and aiding in data collection. Throughout this time, we explored research and sampling and techniques related to bird, mammal, insect and plant surveys, including mist netting, camera traps and the identification and preservation of samples. On one night, we had the amazing opportunity to examine bats caught in the mist nets we set up during the day, although we were unable to handle them directly due to the risk of disease transmission. We were also taken on night drives by the fantastic local guides, who had the uncanny ability to somehow spot animals in the dark as we sped past them just from a flash of their eyes in the night or a distant bird call. All this practical experience was enriched with lectures from professors who accompanied us on the trip, as well as work in the small laboratory, library and museum located on-sure - a favourite haunt for being the only place with air conditioning as well as its exhibits!

As part of the trip, we carried out research projects in small groups which we would report on and present as part of our examined work for the year. My research studied the relationship between insectivory and herbivory, based on the idea that the positive interaction between the two would be amplified by the high species diversity in Borneo. We made models of caterpillars and fruits and planted them in selected areas of plants over the course of three days before collecting them to identify which taxa had interacted with the models. This showed us which taxa would predate on the fruits and caterpillars and yielded highly significant results showing predation on caterpillars increased when fruits were also present nearby.



Throughout the course of the trip, we went on walks and swims in our free time across beautiful suspension bridges, bird-watching and searching for notable flora and fauna. We saw a number of orangutans relatively close to the centre of the field station (babies, males and females!) as well as many langurs, hornbills, squirrels, monkeys and a huge range of spiders, gorgeous butterflies, moths and beetles.

The area is dominated by dipterocarps, many of which hosted large 'bird nests' of epiphytes, as well as strong fungi and insect communities. A day spent visiting other field sites, including oil palm plantations and nurseries, drove home the impact of oil palm in Borneo and how it is changing the landscape, establishing large monocultures of oil palm in an effort to keep up with global demand. We learnt about the importance of palm oil as a product for local growers and economies, as well as important efforts focused on increasing diversity within the plantations rather than stopping or boycotting the farming of oil palm, an incredibly useful crop.

The sound of cicadas, frogs, birds and monkeys provided a constant, unique soundtrack even at night, silenced only by the occasional intense tropical rainfall. The field course to Borneo was an immensely productive and gratifying experience which has truly enriched my understanding of tropical forest ecology. The research I was able to undertake while there was a fascinating experience, and the practical research skills I learnt are invaluable.

I am immensely grateful to Pembroke College and the George Bredin Travel Prize for helping to fund my visit to Borneo.

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