



# Trogon Quest

## Adventures of an Artist in Southeast Asia

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It is the first day of our trogon quest. We are following our expert birding guide Dennis Yong through leech-infested montane forest in northern Sumatra in search of one of the rarest and most beautiful birds in the world, the Sumatran Trogon (*Harpactes mackloti*). We've been hiking for miles in the cool cloud forest. The leeches are ferocious. I pull off at least 45 in the first half hour, then stop counting.

My companion is Rae Anderson, a veteran of World War II and of Korea. He, too, is a prime target of the leeches. Their bites have splattered him in blood nearly head to foot, and he jokes he never looked this bad during two wars. His grandson, Christopher Anderson, a herpetologist with snake stick in hand, is taking everything in stride while keeping a keen-eyed vigil for birds. That snake stick will come in handy later.

Nonchalantly, Dennis notes that wearing sandals allows him to feel the leeches so he can remove them at once before they can bite. His strategy works.

Despite this irritation, we are in an enchanted forest—a botanical wonderland full of orchids and epiphytes, featuring large bird's-nest ferns in nearly every tree.

However, we have to walk nearly five miles through heavily logged forest to reach this area of undisturbed habitat.

Dennis Yong is famed for his ability to mimic bird songs. Usually, when he calls a bird, we cannot tell any difference between his vocalization and the bird's—and apparently neither can the birds. Because of the Sumatran Trogon's repetitious call, Dennis saves his vocal chords by using a tape to play its distinctive song—a high-pitched

**Sumatran Trogon**  
(*Harpactes mackloti*).  
Watercolor on paper  
by © Albert Earl Gilbert.



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**Rae Anderson, an indefatigable World War II vet, was part of the expedition described in this article.**  
*Photo by © Albert Earl Gilbert.*

whistling wiwi...wheeer-lu, repeated every few seconds. We proceed for some time without a response. Then we finally hear a trogon in the distance.

Suddenly, the most heart-breaking moment of our expedition occurs as the sound of chainsaws from local timber cutters extinguishes the trogon's song, and the bird disappears. This jarring jolt of reality crystallizes the plight of trogons in tropical rainforests throughout the world.

Speaking the local dialect, Dennis asks the workers what authority they have to cut, as he knows it is illegal in this area. "People power!" they shout, and the forest inexorably falls. Later, another timber-cutter threatens us with a rifle, but Dennis quickly intervenes and gets us safely away.

**O**ur trogon quest began in 2001 when Australian ornithologist Joseph Forshaw and I began collaborating on a book we planned to be the definitive natural history of these spectacularly beautiful tropical birds, a family that includes the legendary Resplendent Quetzal of Mexico and Central America. In the words of Nigel Collar, trogons "are as recklessly gorgeous as tropical birds can be, with no exception, even for the birds of paradise."

At that time, Joe Forshaw had already done independent fieldwork in Asia, Africa, and the Americas, and was just beginning his text. I had previously studied trogons in tropical America and Africa, but had never been to Southeast Asia, home to 12 trogon species. My concept for the artwork was to depict for the first time all trogon species in their natural habitats and true colors. I knew straightaway I had to travel to Malaysia, Java, Sumatra, Borneo, and Singapore to accomplish my goal. This was going to be the birding road trip of a lifetime!

When planning a jungle expedition, one chooses companions wisely. Who do you want at your side? My friend Rae Anderson, former submarine officer, mountain search and rescue leader, and aviculturist, was the perfect choice. During World War II, he'd enlisted at age 19, graduated from submarine school in Groton, Connecticut, and served as an officer in the Pacific theater, where his submarine came under torpedo fire. Later, during the Korean War, Rae learned how lucky he was to survive the torpedo attack in World War II. Assigned to liaison with a Japanese submarine commander who had also served in the Pacific, they discovered both were in the same area at the same time in 1945.

"When you were in the vicinity of Wake Island, did you ever have torpedoes fired at your sub?" asked the Japanese commander.

"I'll never forget that day," said Rae. "We narrowly escaped two torpedoes."

"No!" shouted the Japanese commander. "We fired three!"

After the war, on a search and rescue mission in California's San Bernardino mountains, Rae was bitten by a rattlesnake. As Rae tells it, "I was bitten by a rattler—and the snake died." But in reality it had been touch and go for Rae, and he'd survived only after being air lifted to receive weeks of expert hospital treatment. According to his doctor, he survived the largest envenomation from a rattlesnake bite ever documented.

Also joining the expedition was Rae's grandson Chris, who was to meet us at the airport in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. I had never met Chris, but knew he would fit right in when he walked off the plane carrying only a light duffel in one hand and a snake stick in the other. In fact it proved to be Chris, with his fantastic vision and hearing, who always first spotted the trogons, enabling me to sketch them through Dennis's spotting scope. Being auditorily challenged, Rae and I were of no help.

*Scarlet-tumped Trogon  
 Borneo Rain Forest Lodge  
 June 17*

*seen three birds  
 a mallet of St. Aris's Sp.  
 Red color is an  
 intense scarlet,  
 almost fluorescent,  
 even in low light.  
 Seen flying to  
 catch insect? prey,  
 or wing?*

*Dark brown eye.*

*Scarlet rump  
 stands out.  
 All perched,  
 often perched  
 bill upward  
 in sketch.*



*tall intense*

*Orbit subventral*

*blue - base skin over eye*

*to eye*

*base under skin*

*patch is much longer*

*than base in Trogon*



**Diard's Trogon**  
(*Harpactes diardii*).  
Watercolor on paper  
by © Albert Earl Gilbert.

*Albert Earl Gilbert*

**Javan Trogon**  
(*Harpactes reinwardtii*).  
Watercolor on paper  
by © Albert Earl Gilbert.



*Albert Earl Gilbert*

Rae's hearing had been damaged by depth charges during World War II and mine ruined by heavy metal when I took my son and daughter to see Metallica and forgot my ear plugs.

"The most important thing is a good guide," advised my friend and fellow artist Guy Tudor. He recommended Dennis Yong of Kingfisher Tours, Malaysia, which was sound advice. During the entire trip, Dennis's expertise ensured safety and success, lots of birds, good company, and no worries.

Our team worked well together. The Asian trogons, unlike the rather lethargic and confiding New World trogons, are skittish and wary. I was lucky to get two or three minutes to sketch before they flew, often across a deep ravine. While I sketched, Rae took detailed photos of the habitat. On my own, I never would have seen so many birds.

When we first arrived from the U.S., Dennis had us booked overnight at the Hotel Equatorial in downtown Kuala Lumpur in view of Petronas Towers, then the world's tallest building. Driving in from the airport, several huge billboards advertised the hotel's famous buffet dinner. Dennis urged us to try it instead of dining on street vendor food, so we did. This buffet, not to be confused with the American concept, featured several chefs preparing fresh regional dishes from Malaysia, China, India, Thailand, Vietnam, and so on. We drank fresh mango juice and enjoyed second and third helpings—a memorable non-birding experience.

We set out on our trogon quest the next morning. We flew into Sumatra's Medan airport and arrived at the Hotel Sibayak in Berastagi, where we were astonished to see smoke plumes billowing from a nearby volcano. "Oh, it does that all the time," the hotel clerk informed us. We rested that night, our fate in the hands of the volcano gods.

After our disheartening experience on the first day with leeches and chainsaws drowning out trogon songs, Dennis next took us to another area of montane forest where there was no logging—but still plenty of leeches. Here I was able to sketch several Sumatran trogons at close range after Dennis called them. Using a pocket-sized sketchbook, I quickly did a pencil drawing of a male Sumatran Trogon showing the unique maroon-chestnut band across its lower back, and carefully noted the color details.

Its prominent bare facial skin, eye ring, and gape are a combination of chartreuse-green and blue, scintillating beyond the range of an artist's pigments. The bird's tail is usually square tipped, but, when compressed, appears somewhat rounded, reminiscent of the African Narina Trogon. The iridescent feathers of its back and upper tail can appear green, blue, or dull depending on the angle and intensity of light, much as a hummingbird's gorget. Instantly it became my favorite bird.

Insects and humidity make it almost impossible to paint in the jungle. At home in my studio, I use a small slide viewer to visually transport me to the bird's jungle habitat. It's almost like being there—but without the leeches. I then start the painting with a detailed pencil drawing based on field notes, sketches, and habitat photos. To ensure accuracy I also refer to bird specimens from the American Museum of Natural History and the Academy of Natural Sciences—Philadelphia. Each large painting takes several weeks to complete. My paintings for this book are probably the first to accurately depict the true colors of all trogon species.

In John Gould's famous 19th-century monographs on trogons, his artists never saw living birds in the field. Working only from museum specimens, they nonetheless



**Joseph Forshaw** wrote the masterful text for *Trogons: A Natural History of the Trogonidae*. Astute birders will note that Forshaw is receiving a manicure from Australian birds. This image of Noisy Miners (*Manorina melanocephala*) is from Australia, where Forshaw is based. Photo by © Albert Earl Gilbert.





Shown here are **Albert Earl Gilbert** (left) and **Dennis Yong** (right) in Sumatra.  
Photo by © Chris Anderson.

produced fine compositions and classic works of ornithological art. Since then, much has been learned about the fugitive nature of trogon colors that rapidly fade on museum specimens. In the wild, in addition to their iridescent feathers of brilliant gold, green, blue, and violet, male trogons—and females to a lesser extent—have lower breast feathers and undertail coverts that are strongly colored with lipochrome carotenoid pigments of red, orange, and yellow, producing an almost fluorescent glow. These pigments fade quickly, even on well-cared-for aviary birds. Thus the beauty of trogons can be best appreciated on living birds in the field. A similar carotenoid pigment gives flamingos and Scarlet Ibises their brilliant tints.

My field sketches, done in late June, show that males and females both had bright cadmium-yellow abdomens and flanks at that time of year. However, we know from recent photos of wild birds that both Sumatran and Javan trogons have a bright orange tint on their flanks. One possibility is that this color occurs during breeding season and subsequently fades with plumage wear. More field observations will be required to answer this and other questions about nesting behavior and natural history.

The Sumatran Trogon is restricted to a narrow altitudinal range (750–2,500 meters; 2,460–8,202 feet) in montane forest on Sumatra and nowhere else in the world. If more recent observations in other parts of its range match our experiences in the Berastagi region, I must wonder if this trogon is only a chainsaw away from threatened status as accelerating timber cutting decimates its habitat.

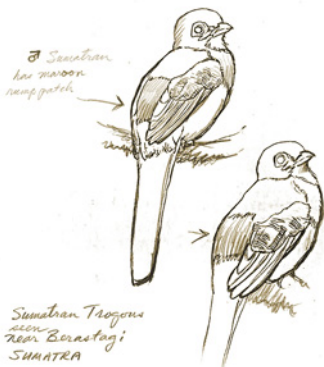
Most Asian trogons have repetitious ventriloqual calls—hollow *kau* or *klew* notes repeated in series, varying according to species. Quite distinct is the Sumatran Trogon's lilting vocalization, by far the most melodious of any trogon song I have ever heard. At the time of our expedition, the closely allied Javan Trogon was not known to have the same high-pitched whistling song as the Sumatran. These trogons are close enough in appearance that the Sumatran was long considered a subspecies of the Javan, and both were at that time known as the Blue-tailed Trogon. Then in 2002, a scientific paper by Nigel Collar and S. Van Balen proposed that they be treated as two separate species now known as Javan Trogon and Sumatran Trogon. In *Trogons*, Forshaw retains the generic name *Harpactes* (instead of *Apalharpactes*) for these two.

We hoped to hear the Javan Trogon's song during our stay at Mount Gede–Pangrango National Park, a UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve in West Java. One of the world's great national parks, famed for its mineral springs and mountain views, it is a botanical, birding, and hiking hotspot. The park was teeming with visitors during our six-day stay. Many local teens enjoyed picnics at the springs, often to the accompaniment of guitars, in a cordial atmosphere.

Each morning in Java we were awakened by the muezzin's sunrise call to prayer as we got off to a very early start. The rich volcanic soil here produces an abundance of vegetables that local vendors wash in the clear, shallow stream we passed every morning on our walk up to the dormant Gede–Pangrango volcano. Those beautiful fresh veggies, along with rice, soy, onions, garlic, and whatever meat or fish was available, form the national dish of Indonesia: nasi goreng. We enjoyed nasi goreng every night—never made the same way twice, and always delicious. One morning we stopped to admire the large bright carrots floating in the clear stream. “Those will probably be in our nasi goreng tonight,” I said.

Just then a toddler pulled down his pants, waded out, and peed on the carrots. “Yep,” Rae said, “you can be sure they will.”

The Javan Trogon lives only in a few areas of montane forest on that island and is





**Sumatran Trogon**  
(*Harpactes mackloti*).  
Watercolor on paper  
by © Albert Earl Gilbert.

*Albert Earl Gilbert*  
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*Albert Earl Gilbert*

listed as endangered with a total population estimated at perhaps a few hundred pairs. So it is not easily seen. Our local guide in Java, Adam Supriatna, had sighted a single trogon a week prior to our arrival and took us to the same spot. We searched and photographed the habitat, but after intensive efforts we were unable to see or hear the Javan Trogon. This was especially disappointing because we had hoped to resolve the question of its thus-far-unknown song. To the best of my knowledge, the first recording of the Javan Trogon's song was made six years after our expedition. It was recorded by Mike Catsis in 2007 in Gunung Halimun National Park, Java. It's been almost ten years since I heard the Sumatran's vibrant song in the field. Listening now to the recording of the Javan Trogon, my impression is that the calls and songs of the Sumatran and Javan are quite similar but not identical. A vocal analysis will be needed to fully resolve this question. You can hear the Javan's call note and song on the xenocanto website <[tinyurl.com/6bzyq9j](http://tinyurl.com/6bzyq9j)>.

Luckily, Adam gave me a photo showing the brilliant coloration of a wild Javan Trogon, featuring a good view of the bird's orange flanks. This, together with my sketches of aviary birds at Jurong Bird Park in Singapore, were what I needed for an accurate portrayal in our book. But I hope my painting also conveys my sense of wonder and reverence for this enchanting montane forest.

Taman Negara is Malaysia's first national park. Although it was difficult acclimating to the lowland heat, we were soon rewarded with unusual sights. We came upon tracks of a small herd of elephants. Then farther on the trail we watched a pair of Red-naped Trogons. Responding to Dennis's call, the male answered to drive away the interloper. I quickly made sketches of the trogons while an Argus Pheasant nearby gave its loud *Oh, WOW* call.

The male trogon slipped silently from its perch in a downward glide, momentarily disappeared, then returned with a large stick insect held crossways in its bill like a long pretzel. He slowly munched it, grasping it with only his bill, not using his foot, calling while doing so, careful not to lose his grip on the insect. A hundred yards farther along the trail, we were treated to the sight of the male Argus Pheasant patrolling his display grounds.

After these humid lowlands, the cool highlands of Fraser's Hill, Malaysia, were a welcome respite. Here we encountered many striking birds, such as Green Magpies, Red-breasted Trogons, and Orange-breasted Trogons.

Chris's snake moment came in Borneo at the jungle lodge in the Danum Valley. Just before dinner in the lodge, a park employee carried a small snake inside to give guests a close look. Immediately, Chris sprang into action. He took the snake from the employee, grasping it very carefully.

"I'm sure this is a venomous snake," Chris told us. "Good thing it's docile."

A glance at his snake guidebook confirmed his diagnosis. Chris had averted a possible tragedy by his quick intervention before any visitors got close enough to be in danger. He took the snake outdoors for an impromptu show and tell for the many fascinated guests, after which he used his snake stick to release it at a safe distance from the lodge. At present, Chris is completing his doctoral studies in herpetology.



Chris Anderson was the eyes and ears—and the snake handler, too!—of the expedition. Photo by © Albert Earl Gilbert.

Orange-breasted Trogon (*Harpactes oreskios*). Watercolor on paper by © Albert Earl Gilbert.





Next morning we got our only glimpse of one of the region's most elusive birds, the Cinnamon-rumped Trogon. It perched about ten feet above the forest floor for a brief time, then disappeared. It seemed to be searching for food at or near ground level. Could it possibly be catching cicadas emerging as nymphs from thousands of holes on the forest floor? Later we watched its close relative, the Scarlet-rumped Trogon, in a spellbinding aerial performance, looking at first like a fluorescent flycatcher, maneuvering and twisting at high speed in pursuit of a flying insect. We also enjoyed great views of Diard's Trogons and of Helmeted and Rhinoceros hornbills.

As we climbed the many stairs to the high-elevation canopy walkway, our local guide, Mr. Wong, pointed out the remains of a porcupine on the top deck. A clouded leopard, he informed us, had made its kill on the forest floor that night, then carried it up the same stairs to the canopy deck to feed undisturbed. We never did see the elusive and nocturnal Bornean clouded leopard, recently accorded full-species status. We did, however, see many interesting mammals, among them colugos, lorises, and leopard cats, while on the lodge's night safaris. Every night a knowledgeable park ranger took us aboard a truck with spotlights for a nocturnal tour—one of the many outstanding features of this lodge. However, this wonderful conservation area is surrounded by extensive timber concessions. We witnessed large-scale logging operations as we drove through on our way to the lodge. In just two hours, we counted 46 large trucks fully loaded with logs—an ongoing, unsustainable loss of habitat.

While trying to learn about the neotropical ornithologist Paul A. Schwartz (see *Birding*, September 2010, pp. 40–50), I was directed by an expert on Amazonian bird speciation, Jürgen Haffer, to *The Curassows and Related Birds*, by Jean Delacour and Dean Amadon (1973)—one of the greatest of the bird “family books.” I opened *Curassows* and was immediately stunned by page after page of remarkable paintings. The artist was Albert Earl (“Gil”) Gilbert.

I contacted Gil, then met with him at his home, and talked about Schwartz. I also learned about some of the fascinating adventures of this gentlemanly bird artist. Following in the hallowed tradition of John James Audubon, Louis Agassiz Fuertes, George Miksch Sutton, and his contemporary, Lars Jonsson, Gil is someone who ventures into the field to find his subjects alive and at home and therefore at their most resplendent. Fieldwork is what Gil requires to maintain the highest standard in his bird depiction, and his distinctive style and meticulous approach have reached their pinnacle in *Trogons*. Along with Joe Forshaw's masterful text—which provides a detailed synthesis of current knowledge—and Gil's field narratives that illuminate the plates, this book is truly one for the ages.

No surprise, then, that it won the 2010 International Book Award's “Best Book Design.” The designer was Derrick Stone, who invented a special fifth basic color to be able to capture in print the intense red trogon colors, and then had the book printed on a rare five-color press. *Trogons* won another award for “Best Cover Design.” Because of its artwork, this book will endure as long as all great books endure, even though our knowledge of these birds—and what the future holds for them—are stories still unfolding.

Gil's original trogon paintings are now part of the permanent collection of the Academy of Natural Sciences—Philadelphia, where they will be on view in the near future.

— Gregg Gorton



**Whitehead's Trogon**  
(*Harpactes whiteheadi*).  
Watercolor on paper  
by © Albert Earl Gilbert.



*Albert Earl Gilbert*



*Albert Earl Gilbert*

**Whitehead's Trogon (*Harpactes whiteheadi*). Watercolor on paper by © Albert Earl Gilbert.**

The nearby Kinabalu National Park in Sabah, northern Borneo, is endlessly fascinating for birders and botanists. Here, thanks to Dennis and Chris, I was able to make good sketches of a tolerant pair of Whitehead's Trogons that occupied a territory quite near to the park museum. Remarkably, this species with the most restricted range of any Asian trogon was the one that presented us with the best view in the field. The bright silver-gray breast of both sexes is a surprisingly prominent field mark in the dark forest.

Every lodge or park we visited in southeast Asia was comfortable, with good facilities and food. A great effort was being made to expand and improve infrastructure for development of eco-tourism. I hope this has continued since our trip.

Truly we had the birding road trip of a lifetime, but we were all alarmed by the decimation of the forests and the shrinking habitat we witnessed first hand, especially in Sumatra and Borneo. One of the purposes of our book is to illuminate the plight of tropical forests and the trogons they support. These concerns are eloquently summed up in the foreword to *Trogons* by Nigel Collar:

*Studies of the effects of logging and fragmentation on tropical forests have shown that trogons are highly sensitive to these perturbations of their habitats; their response generally is to disappear from them, as if mortally offended at the brutal nature of such human intrusion. This makes them extremely useful monitors of habitat quality. In this regard they turn from flagships into yardsticks. Like my first quetzal turning from green to blue, it is just a matter of your point of view. But it means that when you hear a trogon you know that you are in a special place, an area of the richest diversity of life; the trogons themselves make it special, of course, but their gentle calling voices, echoing bell-like in the cathedral of the forest canopy, tell us too that their homes are special for so much other life as well. The challenge for all of us who love nature and respect the wild is to ensure these special places keep their trogons, and the trogons keep their special places.*

I have dreams of another birding road trip in the future. I can only hope it will be with Rae, Chris, and Dennis.

**Acknowledgements**

My thanks to Gregg Gorton, who suggested this article. In Singapore, I was generously welcomed and assisted by Morton Strange and his wife Bee Cho, and by Li Cheih Hsu, veterinarian at Jurong Bird Park. Artist See Swee Leng and his wife hosted a dinner party where photographers Ong Kiem Sian, Soon Chye Ng, and Jimmy Chew showed videos of trogons, graciously allowing me to sketch directly from them.

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