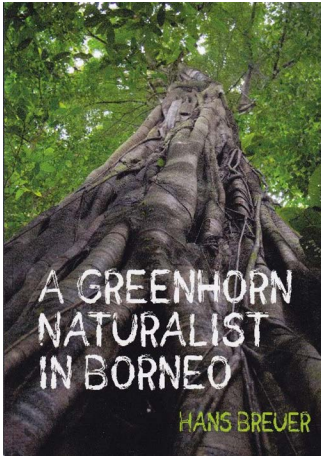


REVIEW: A GREENHORN NATURALIST IN BORNEO

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“He (Dr. Charles Clarke) showed a photo of a gallery forest and asked the audience what they thought they were looking at. The predictable answers ranged from ‘trees’ to ‘forest’, but Dr. Clarke dismissed them all. You’re wrong,” he replied sternly. “You’re not looking at a forest. You’re looking at hundred million leeches disguised as forest.”

(Lecture at the *Nepenthes* Summit in Kuching, Malaysia. 2007)

To say it straight away, Hans Breuer, a German citizen living in Taiwan, is no longer a greenhorn. His first encounter with the magnificent flora and fauna of Borneo inspired the author with his hobby of carnivorous pitcher plants (*Nepenthes*) to such an extent that he moved with his wife and two sons from Taiwan to Sarawak, a Malaysian state on the tropical island. Over the next nine years, he never missed an opportunity to explore its unique ancient rainforests. This resulted in an increasingly profound knowledge of reptiles and snakes in particular. However, the book is expressly not limited to the search for *Nepenthes* and snakes, but goes far beyond that. Up close and not always without consequences, Hans Breuer encounters a number of the planet’s most fascinating creatures. Here is an excerpt:

With its giant eyes, round bear ears and tiny cat nose, the loris was an overdose of adorability. The white lines around its eyes endowed it with an air of profound sorrow, and everything about it just screamed, “Please hug and love me!”. “This is a slow loris, a close relative of apes and monkeys,” I explained.

“... the bad part is, that it’s a dangerous animal. Lorises are the only venomous primates in the world, and this one could dish out serious harm. So we will stay the hell away from him” – “Also, loris bites are among the most powerful in the world.”

“Seriously, Dad? A poisonous monkey? How dumb exactly do you think we are?”

The boys stared at the loris with open mouths. A venomous teddy bear with hyena jaws? Cooooool!

Encounters with locals who make money by trading wild animals and plants may also be delicate. Although officially prohibited, this is part of everyday life on the edge of the jungle – often under the watchful eyes of the police. With a critical view of what is happening, the author describes in his empathetic way, without exaggerated rhetoric, how dramatic the situation really is for the biodiversity in Borneo’s last primeval forests.

Apart from that, reading the book remains enjoyable, as the subtle humor always comes across with well-placed pointed remarks that make you smile, often spiced up with a likeable dose of self-irony. Hans Breuer works as a freelance translator. He studied sinology at the University of Bochum and speaks fluent Chinese besides German and English. The resulting linguistic fluency always sparks a magnificent mental cinema that creates the illusion of being there. Even the book's publisher, which usually publishes in "British English", acknowledges this. As a special exception, he accepts Hans Breuer's "General American" unchanged with the justification (Publisher's Note):

As Hans Breuer's English is of the international/US variety and his writing is so wonderful idiosyncratic (as you're about to find out), we've broken the mould of our UK English style in order to retain nearly all of his preferred spellings, vocabulary, punctuation and syntax. Vive la difference!

Even those who prefer a more scientific approach will be served. Not only by the included scientific names according to Linné's binary nomenclature, with genus and species. The foreword was written by the well-known naturalist, author, and photographer Chien Lee from Kuching, a volunteer at the Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. With his profound knowledge of the flora and fauna of Borneo and his masterful ability to spot perfectly camouflaged animals even in the twilight, Chien Lee accompanies the "greenhorn" Hans Breuer on many excursions. Of course, the famous *Nepenthes* of Borneo also come in front of the camera. They inspired the first European explorers just as much as they do modern scientists today. Hans Breuer mentions how researchers discovered that bats live in the pitchers of *Nepenthes hemsleyana*. Particularly exciting: the pitcher-shaped insect traps of this species, which climbs high into the trees, have been optimized by adaptation so that



Hans Breuer in Borneo.

they reflect the ultrasonic calls of approaching bats to enable them to find their pitcher dwellings easily. In return, the droppings of the “tenants” serve as optimal fertilizer.

The nocturnal photo safaris for snakes in an abundance of nature full of amphibians, bizarre insects and constantly new and surprising encounters make for exciting reading. Just like the story about the rediscovery of the “rarest lizard in the world” (*Lanthanotus borneensis*), currently the only surviving relative of a fossil from the Cretaceous period, which is considered an ancestor of snakes. As Hans Breuer himself notes, “*I had the great fortune to experience it from a front row seat.*” In order to maintain the suspense, I don’t want to give too much away. But what happens is an example of how dangerous the internet has meanwhile become for the survival of rare species. Triggered by serious publications of newly discovered species in scientific media, it sometimes takes only weeks, if not just days, for the first targeted inquiries and orders from unscrupulous “must-always-have-the-hottest-stuff” freaks to arrive directly at the edge of the jungle via social media from all over the world. With this story, the author shows how the inconceivable destruction of biodiversity, even in protected areas, is becoming a perverse and almost commonplace online business.

I read *A Greenhorn Naturalist in Borneo* with great pleasure and can recommend the book wholeheartedly. By no means only to carnivorous plant enthusiasts, who are entertainingly picked up on the very first pages when the author discovers his love for the pitcher plants, which many of us can relate to from our own experience. What follows is a humorous, adventurous, and profound declaration of love to the wonderful nature of the last primeval forests with their biodiversity. It is therefore not easy to answer the question of what I liked less about this book. Perhaps there could have been even a few more than “only” 160+ photos. Also, in the picture of a sundew labeled as *Drosera spatulata* var. *bakoensis*, I rather recognize a *Drosera burmannii*, but this is almost irrelevant in view of the many positive aspects of the book.

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