

PHOTO ESSAY

The display site of the male Great Argus *Argusianus argus*

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Introduction

A sight that was once considered virtually impossible has now become almost routine at two of Malaysia's birding hotspots, Taman Negara in Pahang and Danum Valley in Sabah.

Great Argus *Argusianus argus* are easily detected by their loud calls, but seldom seen. The exceptions occur where males have made their display sites on human trails, and have gradually become accustomed to human traffic. Well-



Plate 1. The male spends a great proportion of the day alone at his display site. A male in breeding condition can be recognised by the fluffiness of the erected head and neck feathers. The very long but very light wing and tail feathers give the illusion that the legs are positioned far forwards. The ocelli on the secondaries are almost completely hidden unless the bird displaying.

Plate 2. The display site is cleaned of leaf-litter by throwing dry leaves and other material forwards with the bill, and additionally by making huge wing-flaps that can lift the male clear of the ground and fan litter away. This is not in itself a display, as it occurs in the absence of a female, but it gives an opportunity to see the very complex patterning of the enormously elongated feathers. The feet are not normally used to clear leaf-litter away by scratching.





Plate 3. It is common, but not imperative, for a male to have a habitual perch at or near the edge of his display site. This may be on a low branch, on the surface root of a tree, or on any natural small mound of earth. This is the typical position for the male to stand, call and preen when not actively cleaning the display site.

Plate 4. A series of loud calls is given every few minutes for many hours during the morning and sometimes at other times of day and night. They may be given from the floor of the display site, or from the adjacent perch, or en route, and at night from elsewhere in the forest. The calls can be heard for more than a kilometre, and the stretching of the arched hyoids in the throat indicates the muscular power employed in each call.





Plate 5. In between bouts of calling the male will descend from the perch to engage in short periods of cleaning the display site. As a result of such work, conducted each morning through a long breeding season, the size of the cleaned patch steadily increases until, by the end of the season, it may have a diameter several times the owner's body length. A large clearing facilitates active, rushing displays should the male's calls succeed in attracting a female.

habituated males will allow a close approach, enabling a watcher to see details of the behaviour used in cleaning the display site, calling, and occasionally fragments of the display itself.

All the photographs here were taken at Taman Negara, on a trail near the park headquarters at Kuala Tahan, on 7 May 2009, by Jif Smart.

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