



Gunung Palung Orangutan Conservation Program



March 2015

Issue: 27

Code RED

An e-newsletter from your friends in West Borneo

Dear Friends and Supporters,

It's been quite the exciting month at Cabang Panti research station! As we have been anticipating for months now, early in March Walimah gave birth to her first offspring. Both mother and baby are doing well, and you can read the entire story in the first article here. The research team has been following the pair every day so as not to miss a minute of this crucial infant development period.

Unfortunately, this month we also bid farewell to research volunteer Becki Ingram, who has been with the project for a year. She recounts her favorite memories in this month's second article. As you can tell from her stories, there is never a dull moment in the rainforest! With your help and support, we will continue to protect this magnificent ecosystem for generations to come - both orangutan and human.

Sincerely,

In This Issue:

Walimah's Journey: From Newborn to New Mom

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Reflections on a Year in Cabang Panti

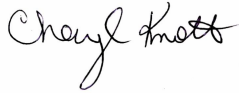
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"Infant Carrying in Orangutans: Implications for Human Evolution"

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Save the Date: GP30+

"Infant Carrying in Orangutans:



Cheryl Knott, Executive Director
[Gunung Palung Orangutan Conservation Program \(GPOCP\)](#)

Walimah's Journey: From Newborn to New Mom

By Cheryl Knott

Walimah had her world debut in the pages of *National Geographic* magazine. In the October 2003 issue she appeared as a tiny infant, only a few weeks old, clinging, with eyes shut, to her mother, Marissa. Since then, we've carefully observed her in every stage of her life as she has gone from a newborn to a new mother. As with all orangutans, the first few months Walimah never left her mother's body, but then she gradually started venturing off, with only about 20% of her time spent on her mom by the time she was three. An infant orangutan first starts to move around and play from the relatively safe enclosure of his or her mother's nest. We watched Walimah as she took her first bold forays, gradually moving 1 or 2 meters away from her resting or feeding mother by the time she was a year old. Much of a young orangutan's life is full of acrobatic play as they learn to easily negotiate their three-dimensional canopy world. Often as not, you see them swinging upside down from the most delicate of branches.

Implications for Human Evolution"

One of the topics that the research project collects data on is how infants manage to cling on to their mothers when they are climbing and traveling through the canopy, and how carrying an infant impacts maternal behavior and energetics. On Friday March 27th, Dr. Cheryl Knott gave a presentation titled "Infant Carrying in Orangutans: Implications for Human Evolution" at the Annual Meeting of the American Association of Physical Anthropologists, in St. Louis, MO. The talk was well received and contributed to the ever-growing body of knowledge on human evolution as understood through observations of wild great apes.

Save the Date: GP30+

In August of this year, we will hold a conference commemorating over 30 years of scientific research at Cabang Panti for researchers, supporters, and our Indonesian partners. This event will be held in Sukadana, West Kalimantan. Interested in joining or have questions about the conference? Reply to this email to request a Save the Date!

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Marissa and her newborn infant, Walimah, in November 1998. First appearing in National Geographic magazine, October, 2003.

Orangutan birth is truly a rare event. They only have a baby once every 6-9 years - the longest birth interval of any mammal! It was this remarkable feature of their biology that first drew me to Indonesia to uncover the relationship between their food intake, in this vastly fluctuating forest, and their hormonal levels. Since the day we found out Walimah was pregnant, we have been diligently tracking her progress in order to better understand orangutan pregnancy in the wild. This effort was made easier by the fact that Walimah is one of our most habituated orangutans and normally has no objection to us following her and recording her every move. Through documenting her daily caloric intake and energy expenditure, and charting that against her hormonal levels, we will soon be able to discover what kind of an impact pregnancy had on her physiology. We'll do the same thing through the many years of lactation and see just how long her hormonal levels remain suppressed.

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 Forward to a Friend

"In every walk with nature one receives far more than he seeks."

-John Muir-

When Walimah was found in March, we hadn't seen her for several weeks, despite diligent searching across every mountain ridge and all the vast peat swamp patches. We knew that her due date was fast approaching and so we were desperate to find her again as quickly as possible. On the 11th of March, Assistant Manager, Rusda, was travelling along the side of the mountain when he came across a female with an infant. She kiss-squeaked furiously and even threw branches at him, before getting back inside her nest. He was unsure at first who this angry female was, but after waiting for several hours it turned out to be Walimah! And sure enough she had a tiny little baby on her - a girl we think, although it's often hard to tell at first. Since then we have been following her every day and recording how she is transitioning into her new role as mother.



Walimah as a carefree adolescent in 2009.

Indeed, Walimah seems to have adapted very quickly to her new position, assisting her baby with holding on and resting whenever the little one needs to sleep. Orangutan infants are usually positioned on the mother's side or stomach - very rarely on her back, as in chimps. Contrary to popular belief, infants and juveniles grab onto the mother's loose skin and not just a handful of hair. They are born with a strong grasping reflex to hold tight - something that human infants are born with as well, but that we quickly lose. For orangutans, though, maintaining an ironclad grip is a matter of life or death and it's reassuring to see that they are holding tightly onto something that won't give way. They also seem to rarely use their feet for grasping, instead relying on those fiercely strong little hands.

Walimah's infant goes wherever she goes, whether gently swinging through the trees, or hanging upside-down in order to dig out termites from a rotten tree. She is most definitely a foodie, she will hunt out food from the most unlikely sources, so we are expecting that Walimah will pass this information on to her daughter. Behavior-wise, Walimah is resting more, especially when the baby needs to sleep, and she has been either lying on her back, allowing the baby to spread out over her stomach, or she has been cradling her in the crook of her thigh. With our detailed data on her body positions and

activities, we will be able to quantify how these aspects of her behavior have changed now that she has a little dependent offspring to watch out for.



Walimah, the new mother, with her baby, March 2015.

We are grateful that both Walimah and her baby are healthy, and despite our recent downpours, are able to continue enjoying a protected life in the Bornean rainforest. With our continued conservation efforts we are hoping to keep it that way!

Reflections on a Year in Cabang Panti

By Rebecca Ingram

Today began the way most days here do, up bright and early at 3:30 am with my colleagues, arriving at the orangutan nest not long after. I have to say, I will not miss these early morning starts! What I will miss, however, are the beautiful creatures I have risen for every morning, followed, and studied so intensely over the past year. It is during mornings like these, while waiting for the orangutan to wake up, that I spend most of my time reflecting on my experiences here in Cabang Panti.



Becki observes an orangutan through her binoculars. As part of her volunteer work, she participated in all aspects of life at Cabang Panti, including orangutan searches, follows and parasitology work.

It seems unreal to me that soon this beautiful forest, which I call home, will be but a thing of my past. My day-to-day life here will return to the hustle and bustle of western life: the urban jungle. The only word I could possibly use to describe the feeling is bittersweet. I'm disappointed that I have to leave behind the gentle and soothing sounds of the cicadas, and the deafening but comforting downpour of jungle rain which sends me off to sleep almost instantly. What about the song of gibbons I wake up to every morning, or the monkeys that rise overhead as I wash in the crystal clear waters by camp? Don't get me wrong, there have been some things about home which I have missed profusely right from the start: my loved ones, a whole host of food items, and the cold crisp British weather (to name a few). There are so many more things about this place though, that I will miss. One in particular really plays on my mind- the sense of never feeling alone, no matter what. I find it is all too easy these days to get lost in big cities, to lose yourself and your sense of being, and to feel alone among millions of people. There has never been one point during my stay here that I have felt alone, even when my GPS stopped working 100 meters off trail while searching for an orangutan, or when I had to walk an hour through the forest to Lupus's nest site at 4 am on my own. The forest never sleeps; it fills your senses with different sounds and smells, and maybe even gifts you with the rare glimpse of a sunbear, civet cat or monitor lizard. In this sense, how could you ever feel alone?

I came to Cabang Panti last March with very little prior knowledge about orangutans. I graduated with a degree in Geography, and although my thesis focused on macaques, I consider myself fairly new to the world of primatology. Over the past year I have seen orangutans and their day-to-day life first-hand, while examining at the same time the vast expanse of literature that aims to define them. I have found it so interesting that my experiences and sightings in Cabang Panti, have been at times completely opposite to what the literature describes as 'normal'. I was privileged enough to arrive just before a forest fruit masting event in the months of June and July last year. A fruit masting is where the forest trees fruit synchronously, attracting swarms of orangutans that come together to feed on the

enormous array of calorie-rich foods. I found the sheer number of groups I witnessed over this period of time, ranging from just two individuals up to over seven, totally remarkable. The large number of males we had coming into very close contact with each other, both flanged and un-flanged, also became a topic of huge fascination to me.

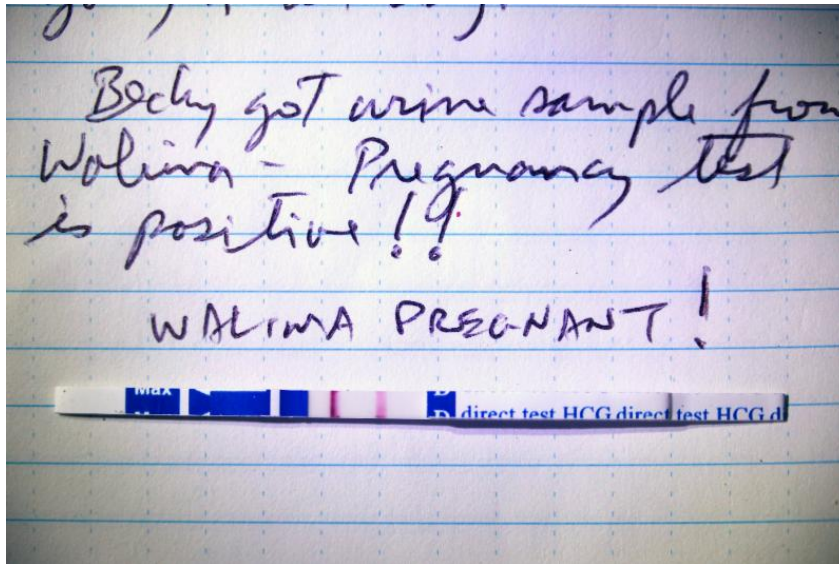


Becki gives a presentation on the orangutan program at the University of Tanjungpura in Pontianak. This is part of our research partnership and a great opportunity for research staff and volunteers to get experience presenting scientific research.

This past year has been invaluable. Due to the vast array of project tasks I have assisted with, I've learned more than I could have ever anticipated. Aside from the official duties, I have learned that the *Neesia* fruit is almost impossible to break into no matter how hardy the tool (while orangutans break into it using their hands and teeth), that catching urine at 4 am with a handmade urine stick is very satisfying and just as difficult as it sounds, and that swimming across rivers or wading through waist high swamps to keep up with the orangutan traveling overhead, are normal things in the life of a researcher. I have also been privileged enough to work with visiting PhD student Caitlin O'Connell, from whom I learned a great deal on sociality and parasitology. Above all, I have learned that life out here is no organized expedition. Things don't always go as planned, visas sometimes get postponed and accidents happen. As a result of a combination of these things, I had the opportunity to co-manage the research site between July and September in an interim period between managers. I am hugely grateful for this experience; it opened my eyes to the world of management and I really got to appreciate the extraordinary amount of hard work managing a project like this entails.

When I first arrived, I was fascinated by almost every individual we found and followed within Cabang Panti. There is one individual in particular though, that I have experienced some truly magical moments with over this past year - Walimah. She is one of the most followed adult female orangutans at the research site, and in fact the only one that we are sure that we've followed since birth. After hearing endless stories about her incredibly fascinating social

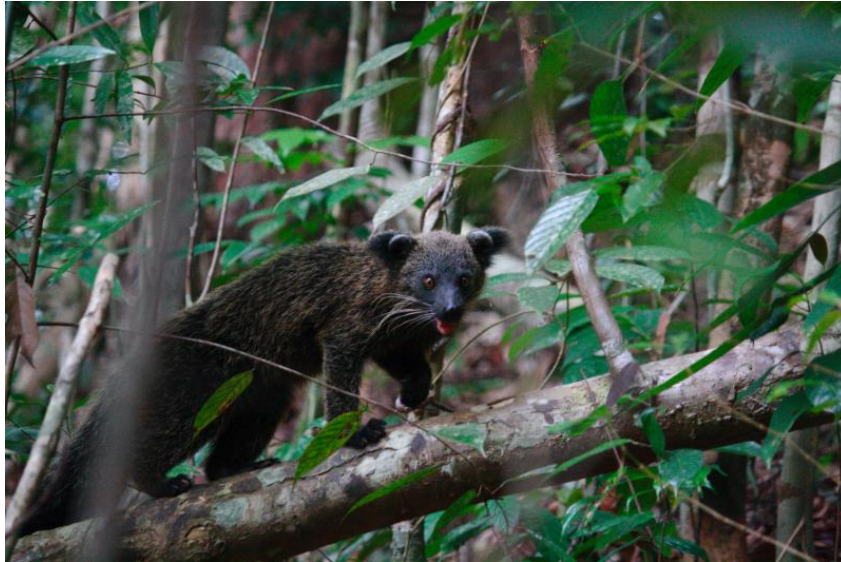
behavior right from my first day, I was dying to meet her and see what all the fuss was about. Alas, she disappeared off our radar for three months from April through to June. It was one sunny morning in July, when I was searching up the mountain, that I was startled by a pair of orangutans crashing around not far off the trail. My heart pounding, I quickly contacted Dr. Knott's husband, Tim Laman, and his team from *National Geographic* magazine and we discovered this was actually Walimah, in a consortship with unflanged male, Yoda. After not seeing her for three months, and noticing abnormalities in her body, I decided to pregnancy test her. The result was positive! I have never felt intense excitement quite like that, and have never had a celebration dance quite like it either! Seven months later, and on the brink of giving birth, Walimah has been followed almost continuously and we have managed to create an impressive data and photo portfolio of almost the entirety of her pregnancy. (Note: Becki wrote this in February, and Walimah's baby was born in early March)



The pregnancy test from when we discovered that Walimah was pregnant, thanks in large part to Becki! Photo: Tim Laman

Right from the start of my time here, I fell in love with search days. I have to admit, many days are met with disappointment - the flash of red can often turn out to be a red leaf monkey. When you hear a long call however, you know for sure that an orangutan is around. There was one day in particular when I was searching deep into the peat swamp, that I had another magical moment. It actually started without any sight or sound of an orangutan. In fact it started with a stare off with a different kind of magnificent beast. This one had black fur, a long chunky tail, whiskers, and curious eyes: a bearcat, or binturong. These animals are known for being truly elusive, and indeed I had absolutely zero expectation of having such an encounter over my time in Cabang Panti. The minutes whizzed past as I sat on the trail in pure disbelief of this animal that was flopped over the branch of a tree, legs dangling on either side, and staring at me. I hadn't quite expected this find! An hour passed before the binturong decided to move on and elegantly disappeared through the treetops. There was no time to digest this, as I immediately heard a bellowing long call from a point just 50 or so meters from where I stood. Compass out, I scrambled my way through the thicket, battling the

vegetation with every step. The long call came to a brisk end, but I trusted my compass, stopping every few steps to listen for any more sounds. The next thing I knew, I was standing directly below one of our huge flanged males, Prabu, and quickly had to dodge a falling branch. Whether that branch had hit me or not (and luckily it did not!) it would not have taken away just how amazing that morning had been.



A bearcat, known in Indonesia as a binturong, in the forest around Cabang Panti research station.

These are only two of many fond memories I will take away with me from this place and the wonderful people I have had the privilege of sharing it with. I couldn't sign off without saying a huge thank you to Dr. Cheryl Knott for providing me with such a life changing opportunity, in a forest I never dreamed would be so beautiful. Not to mention my wonderful managers, Jennifer Brousseau and Kat Scott, both of whom made sure I was never jobless, and always lifted my spirits even when I thought I couldn't be any happier. Whatever the future brings, and wherever I end up, Cabang Panti will always hold a special place in my heart for providing me with the most eye-opening introduction to the world of primatology. Who knows, maybe one day I will get the chance to return to meet Walimah's baby, and chase Prabu around the peat swamp once more.

Gunung Palung Orangutan Conservation Program (GPOCP)

<http://saveGPorangutans.org>

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