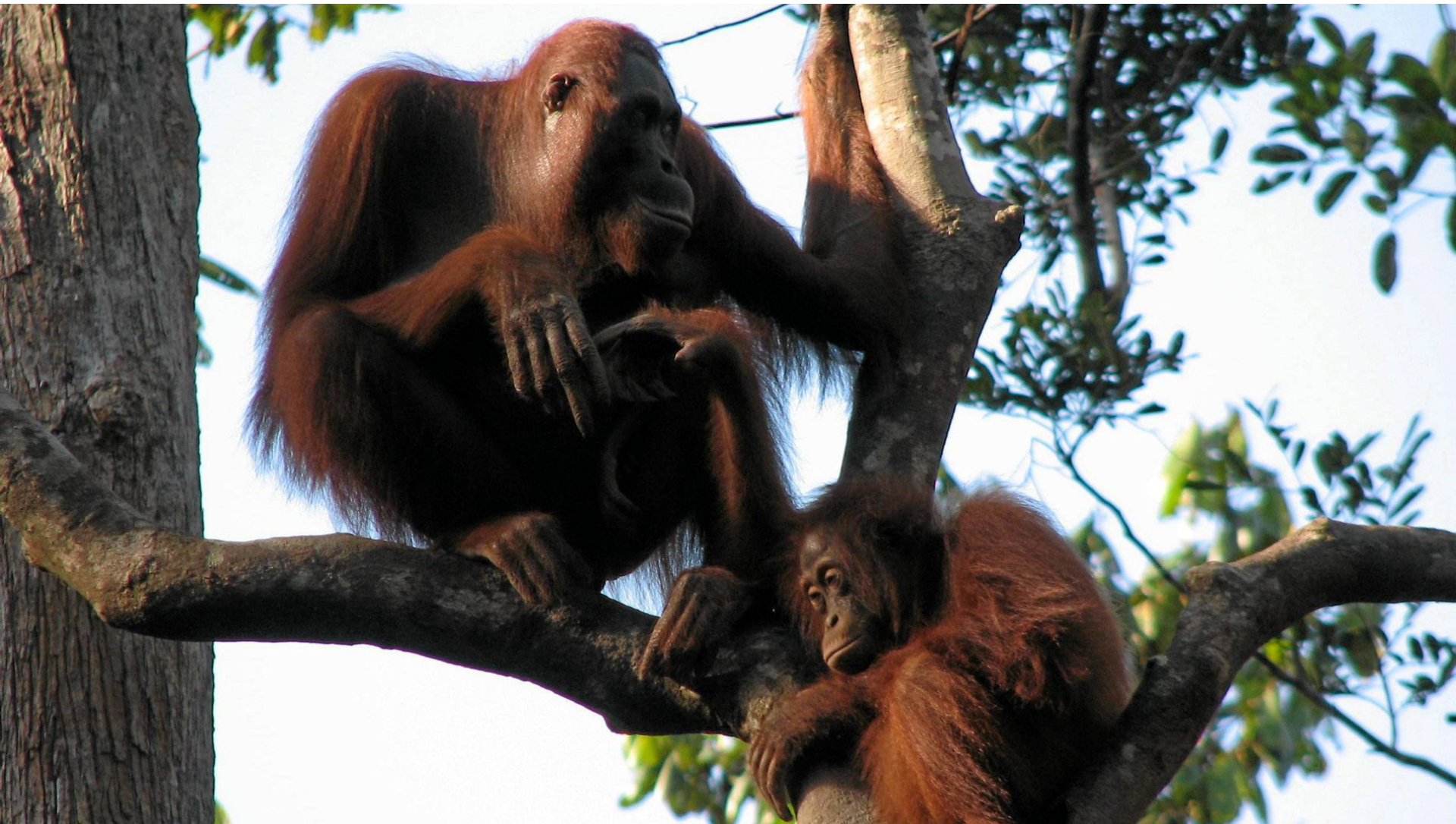


We heard something, but saw nothing. The orangutans remained elusive



Elusive wild orangutans reveal themselves in a Borneo rainforest.

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0 COMMENTS



"There's definitely something over there," our guide says, hearing a crunching and snapping sound that has interrupted the cacophony of jungle noise to which I have, by now, become deaf.

Taking a break from our ordeal, we're resting on a termite-infested log, its corrupted, rotten

wood crumbling away wherever we're too rough with it. Hiking through wild, tropical rain forest is a notoriously uncomfortable affair and Borneo's doesn't differ.

We trudge and wade our way through the submerged peat bog floor, over roots and under vines, losing our footing every few yards to invisible sinkholes as mosquitoes attack wherever skin is revealed, our hands too busy grasping for leverage to swat them where they land.

Occasionally our path is crossed by lines of fire ants, feared for their propensity to inflict hundreds of painful, burning bites. With our pants tucked into our socks, we jump these lines as fast as we can before immersing ourselves once more in the mire, and checking ourselves for hangers-on. One manages to bite me on the finger. It feels like a wasp sting and my fingertip burns a bright red. It blazes and aches and I'm lucky there aren't more.

We search the jungle for four days, pulling on our soggy clothes each morning and dragging ourselves through the tangled mass of the forest. We follow the smoking trail of our guide's citronella coil, tearing our way through vines that seem to hang on and hold us back. Some roots rise from the swamp only to bend sharply back into it as though changing their minds on seeing what life above ground was like.

Gibbons swing over our heads, a startled monitor lizard scuttles away, a tree frog pumps its throat, hairy caterpillars bristle their fronds as butterflies and dragonflies of every colour swoop and flutter around us.

Cicada song builds slowly in the distance, triggering a wave of rattling sound that rumbles and washes over us before ebbing back into the bush. The jungle is saturated with life, but what we seek it is unwilling to surrender.

Now we are tired, suffocated by heat and humidity, itchy and unrewarded. Now, resting on the crumbling log, I take off my decomposing shoes, peel my sodden socks from my wrinkled, peat-stained feet, lie back and give up.

It happens again; another crunch, another snap. "Definitely, about a hundred yards that way," says the guide, nodding into the oppressive density of the jungle.

Hurriedly, I pull my shoes and socks back on and move rapidly over the forest floor toward

the commotion.

And there they are. Three of them; their massive, hirsute weights cracking and almost crippling, it seems, each of the trees between which they clamber.

I stand, awed, swaying like the trees that struggle with their heaving masses and stare up with childish wonder, almost disbelief, at our red rewards.

Three wild orangutans.

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