Armed with binoculars and scant knowledge of birds, Zulita Mustafa has a fun time on her first bird-watching trip.

Don't ask me the difference between a parrot and a pigeon. I know birds fly but that's about the only thing I knew about them, until I was sent on a bird-watching assignment.

There are two essentials for birding, I am told. A good quality bird-watching binoculars and a tour guide.

"Come prepared with meals, bottled water, snacks, insect repellent, sunscreen and notebook," I am told. But I am careful not to over pack or I'll risk getting tired before the finish.

The trip to Kuala Gula Bird Sanctuary in Perak, organised by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, is my first bird-watching experience.

The sanctuary, one of the premier migratory bird landing spots in the country, is within the Matang Mangrove Forest Reserve, a rich mangrove ecosystem that is a protected spot for migratory birds to feed and rest at the large wetland area when they migrate from the northern to the southern hemisphere.

The serene view of Sungai Kuala Gula

The day finally dawns. It is a bright, sunny Friday morning, and I have high hopes of seeing lots of birds flocking to the area.

The excitement grows as we walk towards the jetty next to Kuala Gula Sanctuary Resort where we had stayed the night before. There are boats waiting and each can take five to 10 people at a time. Bird-watching is apparently good business at Sungai Kuala Gula.

The river meets the Straits of Malacca. The riverine area is home to thousands of migratory birds which roost in the nearby mangrove swamps between August and December.

As we make our way along the river, nature guide Samad Aran from Sahabat Hutan Bakau Kuala Gula explains that Kuala Gula is a small fishing village in the Kerian district, about 80km west of Taiping town and 80km south of Penang. The community shifted here about 70 to 80 years ago from Teluk Rubiah, near Lumut.

Currently, the population in Kuala Gula is 6,500 with Chinese farming...
The brahminy kite eagles look especially majestic in the sky. According to the book *Avifauna Kuala Gula, Perak*, 196 bird species have been recorded in and around Kuala Gula, out of which 62 are migratory. The birds come from as far as Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Japan and China. Kuala Gula is also a sanctuary for resident bird species such as mangrove Pitta and Great Tit as well as Pigeon, Cuckoo, Woodpecker, Babbler, Flycatcher, Tailorbird and Sunbird. Bulbul, Bee Eater and Myna are also known to frequent the open areas.

**PLANTING MANGROVES**

Not far from the bird reserve is a large wetland swamp, where the birds make a pit stop. Plant lovers will appreciate Kuala Gula as it is home to 17 true and associated mangrove plant species. When I hear that we will be planting mangroves, I am excited as I have never done this before. But first, I have to hop off the boat and make my way through the muddy field. Though walking barefoot in the mud feels gross initially, it turns out to be fun. I struggle a little bit to balance myself as I drag my feet, one step at a time. But I am looking forward to the planting so I plod on.

We plant 40 trees. Mangroves help protect coastal areas from erosion and tsunamis. They are also an important part of the ecosystem as many organisms and animals thrive here.

After about half an hour, it's time to leave. Removing mud off our bodies turns out to be a chore.

**NATURE TOUR**

En route to our next destination in Perak, we stop at the Eco-education and Conservation Centre in Kuala Sepetang, near Taiping. It's within the Kuala Sepetang Mangrove Park.

One of the nine forest reserves of Matang Mangrove Forest Reserve stretching from Kuala Gula to Bagan Pandan. Established 20 years ago, with an area of 20 hectares, the centre is also a tourist attraction in Perak.

Though it is pouring heavily, our spirits are high with the prospect of seeing what the forest has to offer. Holding an umbrella each, we walk carefully on boardwalks and bridges through the park. Information boards line the pathway.

The rain doesn't allow us to stop for long to enjoy the sight of the different types of trees, ferns and shrubs that grow in swamps. However, I do learn a thing or two that makes me appreciate the unique mangrove ecosystem even more.

**Bukit and Bukit Margoswree mangrove species planted for making charcoal. About 75 species of bird, some migratory, can be spotted here, along with wildlife such as monkeys, bats, otters and snakes. None makes an appearance though when we are there.**

Boats can be chartered from a jetty in the park for river cruising and adventures during the night and day, or for fishing. Small wooden chalets provide cheap overnight accommodation. There is also a meeting hall and a small restaurant.

The park is open throughout the day. Night entry is by arrangement.

**RICH ECOSYSTEM**

Our next bird-watching adventure is at the Kuala Sangai Pinang Mangroove Forest, part of a rich ecosystem for wildlife and migratory birds as well.

The boat ride to the forest from the Penang National Park jetty takes about 40 minutes. We pass Pantai Kerachut, a beautiful white sandy beach which is popular as a picnic and camping site. The area also has a meromictic lake where freshwater from the island's streams meets sea water. Interestingly, the two types of water do not mix. The lower layer is highly saline and denser than the freshwater.

The sandy stretch is also the nesting place for green turtles from April to August, and Olive Ridley from September to February.

We are lucky that deputy superintendent Wan Mat Wan Harun from Penang National Park is on board to brief us. Coupled with the lovely weather, the trip is most comfortable.

As the boat turns towards Kuala Sangai Pinang Mangrove Forest, the area is so quiet and peaceful that I can almost hear my heart beat. When we arrive at a fishing village, Wan Mat asks if we want to stay on board or continue the journey in canoes. I have never canoeed so I grabbed the opportunity excitedly. It is quite an experience going into the mangrove forest in a canoe.

Colourful birds on trees and the riverbanks fly off as our canoe approaches them. When we go deeper into the mangrove forest, we spot many more birds, including Egret, cattle, little and great, Black-crowned Night-heron, Brahminy Kite and Sandpiper (common and cutie).

However, we couldn't watch them for long as we have to return to the jetty before the tide turns.

On our return journey, we see fishermen laying traps for crabs and putting markers along the sides of the mangrove swamps.

Prawn catching and fishing boats make for a refreshing sight but the most memorable is the sight of feathered beauties in flight.

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