

Life from Headwaters to the Coast

GUNUNG PENRISSEN

The Roof of Western Borneo

Edited by

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History of Explorations

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The earliest mention of the Penrissen Range can be found in the account of Sarawak by Hugh Low (1824–1905; Fig. 1), botanist-explorer-turned administrator, in his 1848 book, ‘Sarawak. Its inhabitants and productions. Being notes during a residence in that country with His Excellency Mr. Brooke’. Low wrote the following passage: “*The southern branch of the Sarawak river has its sources in the Gunong Penerissen: the highest land in this part of the island. Penerissen, or Besuah, as it is sometimes called, is a table-topped mountain, about 4,700 feet in height, situated between sixty and seventy miles from the coast in a direct line*”. Low provides no description of his ascent but details the village of Sennah (in Padawan) thus: “*On the Sarawak, or northern side of the mountain, about four or five miles from its base, is situated, amongst the most beautiful groves of fruit trees, and on either bank of a quiet and crystal stream, the well-built houses of the Sennah Dyaks*” (Fig. 1). Low’s field journals mention visiting the mountain in December 1845.



Fig. 1 (left). Hugh Low (1824–1905), British botanist and administrator.
Fig. 2 (right). Sir Spenser Buckingham St John (1825–1910), British civil servant.



Fig. 3. Reproduction of a woodcut plate from Low (1848), showing a bamboo bridge upstream from the village of Sennah, at the foothills of Gunung Penrissen.

LIFE IN THE FORESTS

OF

THE FAR EAST.

BY

SPENSER ST. JOHN, F.R.G.S., F.E.S.,

FORMERLY H.M.'S CONSUL-GENERAL IN THE GREAT ISLAND OF BORNEO,
AND NOW
H.M.'S CHARGÉ D'AFFAIRES TO THE REPUBLIC OF HAYTI.

WITH NUMEROUS ILLUSTRATIONS.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

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Fig. 4. Title page of St John's (1862) travelogue, "Life in the Forests of the Far East".

Contemporaneous with Low, and often a co-explorer was Sir Spenser Buckingham St John (1825–1910; Fig. 3), British Consul in Brunei between 1848–1858. In his work, “Life in the Forests of the Far East” (1862; Fig. 2), St John erroneously described the mountain as “...above 5,000 feet above the level of the sea”, and in an 1886 article in the Sarawak Gazette, provided a graphic description of his ascent. Starting from Kuching on 6 May 1858, their river route took them to the village of Sennah on 19 May. On 22 May, the team started the ascent, reaching on 27 May, only to find that they had reached the summit of the adjacent Gunung Mesuah!



Fig. 5. Odoardo Beccari (1843–1920), Italian botanist and explorer.

The botanist-explorer, Odoardo Beccari (1843–1920; Fig. 5) from Florence, was resident of an isolated house called *Vallombrosa* (named after a Benedictine abbey in the Tuscany region of Italy), at the foothills of the Matang Range, Sarawak, between 1865–1868. Beccari visited Penrissen in 1866 with the intention of collecting plant specimens. Beccari’s botanical collections in South-east Asia and New Guinea were made in collaboration with and financial support from Marquis Giacomo Doria of Genoa (1840–1913), a patron of the Civic Museum of Natural History at Genoa. Beccari did not manage to reach the summit of the mountain, confining his collecting activities at the base. In his 1902 travelogue (‘Nelle Foreste di Borneo. Viaggie Ricerche di un Naturalista’, English translation 1904, ‘Wanderings in the Great Forests of Borneo. Travels and Researches of a Naturalist in Sarawak’), he wrote “*It was my intention to start from this place, which has an elevation of about 1,150 feet, for the summit of Gunong Pennerrissen, or as I have also heard it pronounced, “ Mengrissen”. This has been considered one of the highest mountains in Sarawak...*”. Nonetheless, logistical problems for Beccari became formidable, including unwillingness of the local guides and poor planning. Beccari wrote with a twinge of disappointment, “*The Dyaks of Tappo Kakas, for some special motive of their own, showed no wish to guide me up the mountain. On the contrary, they did their best to dissuade me from attempting the ascent, and declared*

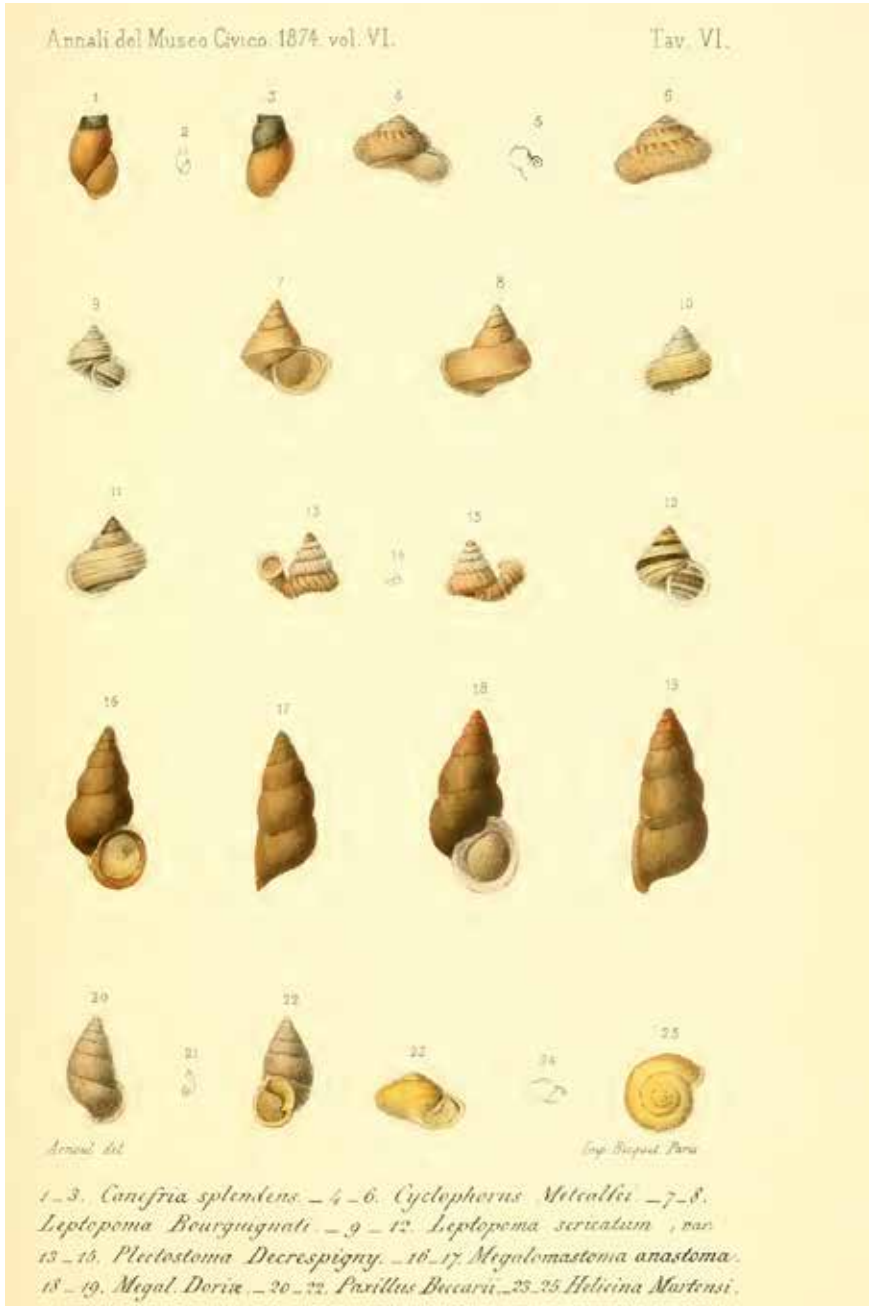


Fig. 6. Plate VI from Issel (1874), showing some of Beccari's collections of Bornean molluscs.

that unheard-of difficulties would beset me on my road to the summit. Most certainly from the village in which I was the way to Mount Pennerrissen was neither short nor easy, as I could see for myself. Besides, I had brought with me only a small quantity of provisions". Nonetheless, Beccari collected specimens, including molluscs, some of which were presumably from the lower elevations of Penrissen (Fig. 6) and ascended the adjacent Gunung Wa.

An early collector of zoological and geological material from Sarawak was Alfred Hart Everett (1849–1898), civil servant with both the Sarawak Civil Service and the British North Borneo Company, who sold specimens to the European museums and private collectors. In an 1893 paper by the British ornithologist and Assistant Keeper of the Vertebrate Section of the British Museum (Zoology Department), Richard Bowdler Sharpe (1847–1909). An enumeration of bird specimens collected by Everett from "Mount Penrissen and the adjacent hills". The account lists as many as 60 bird species from Penrissen. Little else is known of localities of sampling, except that one specimen was taken at "900 feet" (corresponding to ca. 274 m, or at low elevation), and one at "3500 feet" (ca. 1,067 m, or near mid-elevation).

Some of the earliest biological material from Penrissen derives from the 1899 expedition lead by Robert Shelford (1872–1912; Fig. 7), then Curator of the Sarawak Museum. These cover various plant and animal groups- ferns, insects, amphibians, reptiles and birds. Shelford's expedition was reported briefly in the official organ of the state government, the *Sarawak Gazette* and scientific accounts of the expedition were published in the scholarly *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* for January 1900 (Fig. 8) and in greater detail in his 1916 book ('A Naturalist in Borneo') that was incomplete at the time of his passing and was posthumously published. The team departed Kuching on 5 May 1899, travelling in three boats up Sungei Sarawak, and reached Pangkalan Ampat the following day. Besides five native collectors and a cook, Shelford was accompanied by Edmund Arthur Wilson Cox (1860–1932), the District Magistrate of Upper Sarawak. As in the earlier expeditions, the



Fig. 7. Robert Shelford (1872–1912), Curator of Sarawak Museum.

A Trip to Mt. Penrissen, Sarawak.

At midday on the 5th of May of this present year of grace, Mr. E. A. W. Cox, of the Sarawak Government service, and myself left Kuching for the upper waters of the Sarawak river on a long talked-of collecting expedition. Our ultimate destination was Penrissen, a mountain of 4,800 feet high, five miles from the "ulu" of the left hand branch of the Sarawak river, and about fifty miles as the crow flies from the sea-coast. The mountain had previously been scaled, in part at least, by Signor Beccari, Mr. A. H. Everett, Dr. G. D. Haviland and Mr. Henserson, but had never, from a zoological point of view, been thoroughly collected over, so that our hopes of obtaining interesting and valuable results ran high.

Our staff consisted of five Dyak collectors, Malay and Chinese boys, and a Chinese cook; to convey these, ourselves and our somewhat bulky baggage, three boats were requisitioned, but as events turned out proved insufficient; however the start was fair and through the lower reaches of the river all went well and comfortably. The night was spent in part at the little village of Selobang, but to catch the tide and to avoid the din of a neighbouring Chinese "wayang," we re-embarked at 12 p.m. and proceeded quietly on our way till at 6.30 in the morning the first "karungan" or gravel bed was encountered; here we stopped for breakfast and a delightful bath in the now somewhat rapid river. At 9 we were on again, and soon began to experience some difficulty in progression. The river abounded with shallows and small rapids: up and over these our heavy and heavily-laden boats, which to use a Malay expression "ate much water," were poled and hauled only with the greatest difficulty and exertion. At the very bad places a general halt had always to be called, whilst the respective crews joined forces and hauled with ropes one boat up at a time. Late in the afternoon we finally won to Segu, and right glad were we to partake of the

Fig. 8. Front page from the *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* for January 1900, showing Shelford's report of the Penrissen expedition.

Sennah approach was taken, leading up to the rock overhang referred locally as Batu Tinong on 11 May. The next day, the team climbed to an altitude of “3,400 feet” (ca. 1,036 m asl) and made camp at a small, flat area. Thereafter, Shelford remained at the site, presumably on account of his poor health (being stricken by tubercular hip joints as a child, the disease eventually returning to claim his life before he turned 40), while Cox explored the higher elevations of Penrissen, reaching the summit on 14 May. The team finally brought down their traps and nets and descended on 24 May to the base of the mountain.

The eight-page expedition report had an appendix on the mammals (18 species) and birds (88 species) collected, authored by Shelford, following which were appendices on the plant collection (eight species, including three recognised as new to science) collected, authored by Henry Nicholas Ridley (1855–1956), then Scientific Director of the Singapore Botanic Gardens, and one on the ferns (14 species) by “Bishop Hose” (probably George Frederick Hose, 1838–1922, the Bishop of Labuan and Sarawak). The supplement, which was compiled by Shelford, concluded with a short list (six species) of mosses and hepatics, collected by Alfred Hart Everett (1848–1898), English geologist and administrator from Penrissen and identified by the Finnish botanist, Viktor Ferdinand Brotherus (1849–1929). The following year, Shelford wrote a 14 page account on his butterfly collection from Penrissen in the same journal.

Evident from the description of these expeditions is that knowledge of the biodiversity of Penrissen is fragmentary. Rather limited follow-up studies have been conducted since the time of Robert Shelford, due no doubt to logistical challenges of accessing these ranges in the recent past. These previous studies have suggested a great diversity within plant, invertebrate as well as vertebrate lineages, including frogs, birds and bats, that are waiting discovery.