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Forest
treasures

Two books on the flora and fauna found in the forests of Malaysia provide a spectacular and colourful insight of nature in all its glory, and a reminder to conserve these national treasures, writes **ELIZABETH JOHN**

THE dark forests that rise from the still, dark waters of a peat swamp are anything but attractive. However, the same can't be said for its occupants.

Some are painted in the colour hues of fireworks, some are dressed in delicate ruffles and folds and others are large and majestic. Unlikely as it seems, the muddy, mosquito-infested jungle is just where these beauties go to hide.

From rainbow-hued kingfishers to giant bats and exotic orchids, a host of nature's greatest and most gorgeous beauties up the thousands of hectares of drab grey-green swamps that dot the country. And they are featured in all their

glory in two publications that are a result of a joint project between the United Nations Development Programme/Global Environment Fund project and the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia, in several peat swamp forests here.

Orchids of Peat Swamp Forests in Peninsular Malaysia detail the species found in peat swamp forests in four states.

It was prepared after a surprisingly rich find during a 2004 scientific expedition to the Sungai Lohar forest in Pahang — 51 species, including some more commonly found in highland areas and two species of Vanilla.

The orchid family consists of 30,000 species worldwide with

Malaysia accounting for three per cent of that.

The book by Ruana Go and Khalil Aziz Hamzah features several of these newfound beauties, details their history, diversity, traditional uses and the threats they face.

The other stars of the peat swamp forests are featured in *Birds and Bats of Longop Bukit National Park*. Authored by conservationist Dr. Mahes Gnanan, birder and tax biologist Jason Hon and naturalist Daniel Kong, it focuses on one of Sarawak's last large swaths of peat swamp forests — the Longop Bukit National Park. The park that covers over 100,000ha is home to Sarawak's largest freshwater lake, over a hundred species of bird and 36

species of bats, including the world's largest — the large flying fox.

A real heavyweight champion that weighs one kilogramme and boasts a wingspan of one metre, the large flying fox roosts in big numbers in the park.

One of the major attractions of the park is the mass emergence of this species in the evening, flying low over the lake and park quarters to feed in forests elsewhere.

Apart from illustrations in full colour as well as close-up photos of these winged summers, the book also has advice on how people can help conserve these natural treasures.

Both also tell of the threats its beautiful occupants face now and in years to come.