

JUNIOR CATEGORY

SECOND PRIZE

Adam Hakim Hogg

Sekolah Kebangsaan Bukit Fraser, Bukit Fraser, Pahang, Malaysia

TOPIC 1

Write about your favourite primate and say where it is found, and why you like it.

My Favourite Primate is!!!

The Siamang.

Imagine! With your eyes closed, the faint breath of warm air on your face, the sweet smell of the tropical rainforest and the rustling of leaves in the breeze, with the songs of wild birds in the air. What a wonderful feeling.

This tranquility is abruptly broken by a loud whooping sound echoing across the rainforest canopy. The Siamang gibbons have woken up. Resembling miniature black gorillas, but more slender with proportionately longer arms, these, the largest members of the gibbon family announce their presence to all.

Here where I live in Fraser's Hill, Pahang, Malaysia, we are surrounded by rainforest and this is home to many creatures, big and small. One of these creatures is my favorite primate, the Siamang gibbon *Symphalangus syndactylus*. This animal is not only the largest member of the gibbon family but is also the biggest primate that is found in Fraser's Hill. The Siamang occurs naturally only in Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula, where it ranges from the low lands up to 1500 meters. Currently listed on the IUCN red list as ENDANGERED!

I still remember the first time I ever encountered the Siamang in the wild. It was not long after my family moved to Fraser's Hill, a quaint hill-station nestled in Malaysia's Titiwangsa Range. At first we heard their calls and then we saw them swinging from tree to tree passing by our house, it was really exciting. My second sighting was one day when I noticed something big hanging with arms outstretched from a branch high in the fig tree opposite our house; at first I actually thought it was a gorilla. After close observation I realized that this was a Siamang. This was the first time I had the chance to have a really close look at one and I thought it was awesome, so big, shiny, and jet black, with a grey coloured chin like a beard. Then I noticed there were others, a family. They even had a smallish baby. Nowadays I frequently see these creatures near my home when the fig trees are in fruit and I always get excited when I see them.

The Siamang is big, weighing up to 14 kg and covered in a thick, shaggy black fur, I guess to keep them warm because here at our altitude of 1300 meters, it gets cold sometimes. Their long powerful arms are used for swinging through the trees. Like all gibbons, Siamangs have amazing balance, it is funny to watch them running along the branches with arms outstretched and then jumping and swinging from tree to tree.

Early in the morning after they have woken up they start moving around usually in small family groups consisting of two adults and one or two young looking for food. They mainly live high in the canopy among the treetops and feed on forest fruits. Many times we don't even see them but their howling calls can be heard for miles around.

The Siamang has a large pouch in its throat, which it fills with air and then uses it to throw out its call that can be heard from far away. This call is almost as nice as seeing the animal itself. It starts slow and loud then gets progressively faster and louder into a sound that is difficult to describe in words but nonetheless awesome to hear. This call is thought to be a territorial call warning other families of their presence and that they should stay away. However I also read on the Internet the call is also a means of simple communication to talk to their neighbours'.

My spare time is spent indulging in my hobby of nature photography, photographing birds, snakes and insects, but getting pictures of the Siamang is always that special bonus.

However it is disappointing to read that Siamangs are not safe. They are heavily affected by habitat loss such as logging and also the pet trade. This makes me so sad that such a beautiful creature has to suffer because of human greed. We have seen the results of the pet trade here in Fraser's Hill with other species now also threatened. Trapdoor spiders, tarantulas, butterflies and snakes are all affected just because of human greed, which saddens me deeply.

For now I am sure that here in Fraser's Hill the Siamang is still safe and is in my opinion the king of the hill, and without doubt, my favourite primate.

Judges' comments

The essay felt very personal, and one could feel the writer's love for the forest and its inhabitants especially the siamang, which is the largest and loudest gibbon in the world, native to Peninsular Malaysia. Only someone who has spent time and watched the siamang in the wild could relate to the writer's excellent description of the animal's behaviour. An interesting way of story telling.