

THE CHESTNUT FOREST-RAIL, *RALLINA RUBRA*
(RALLIDAE), AT TARI GAP, SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS
PROVINCE, PAPUA NEW GUINEA, AND ITS
VOCALIZATIONS

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The Chestnut Forest-Rail *Rallina rubra* is found on the island of New Guinea in montane forests of the Arfak Mountains and the Central Ranges east as far as the Victor Emanuel and Hindenburg Mountains, western Papua New Guinea in the vicinity of Telefomin (Ripley 1977; Coates 1985; Beehler *et al.* 1986). Recent altitudinal ranges given for this species are 1500 to 3050 m (Coates 1985) and 1500 to 2700 m (Beehler *et al.* 1986). The only population in Papua New Guinea is, however, the subspecies *R. r. telefominensis* which is known from about 2200 m in the Victor Emanuel and Hindenburg Ranges near Telefomin, where it is apparently very uncommon (Gilliard & LeCroy 1961; Coates 1985).

Caution must be exercised in identifying this rail as it may be easily confused with the Forbes' Forest-Rail *Rallina forbesi* in which both sexes have black barring across the tail, while in the Chestnut Forest-Rail the tail is plain chestnut. Whereas male Chestnut Forest-Rails are near-uniform chestnut, the male Forbes' Forest-Rail has contrastingly darker wings. Female Chestnut Forest-Rails have the white-spotted black wings and back pattern extending on to much of the mantle, whereas in the female Forbes' Forest-Rail most of the mantle is plain chestnut. It is, however, often difficult to see these secretive terrestrial birds well in their dense dark habitat, let alone see the species-specific plumage details.

During ornithological field work in the moss forests of Tari Gap (5° 58' S, 143° 8' E) we were able to confirm the identity of the *Rallina* forest-rail that is not uncommon there (pers. obs.). Between 15 October and 5 December 1987 CF spent much time in canvas hides making observations for periods of two to four hours at bowers of Archbold's Bowerbird *Archboldia sanfordi* and nests of Lesser Melampitta *Melampitta lugubris*. During one such watch on 4 November at 08:06, CF watched a male Chestnut Forest-Rail walk to within 2 m of his hide and then give a series of approximately 60 sharp shrill *krill* or *keow* notes of even tone, slowly for the first five to ten notes and then every 1 to 2 seconds, with head and bill lifted upwards and gape wide open for each note as the nictating membrane was brought briefly up over the eye. The entire bird was very clearly seen to be uniform chestnut, except for blackish flight feathers as is indicated in the colour plate in Ripley (1977) but not in Beehler *et al.* (1986). The tail was clearly unmarked. After calling, the bird walked past CF at a distance of only 30 cm. At 08:08 the same bird walked up a broad sloping fallen mossy branch whilst commencing to call. It stopped on the

branch, 1 m above the ground, and gave approximately 60 to 70 notes in total, whilst another distant bird immediately replied to each note.

At 08:35 our local field assistant brought us an adult male Chestnut Forest-Rail he had caught by hand. This bird had a mid-chestnut iris, a blue-grey base to its bill, and black legs and feet. It was photographed and quickly released without being weighed or measured to avoid distressing it further. On 20 November CF photographed an adult female as she walked across the forest floor. Her soft-part colours were as in the male. Colour transparencies of both sexes have been deposited in the PNGBS library as these represent the first pictures taken of the species alive and provide confirmation of its occurrence at Tari Gap.

On 6 November at 08:44, CF again heard rail calls whilst in another hide. Of 156 *krill* or *keow* notes the first 5 or 6 were softer, and the following ones were of even volume and pitch, at intervals of 1.5, seconds until the last 20 to 30 which were a little slower in pace, one about every 2 seconds.

At 08:32 on 9 November, CF heard two rails duetting, giving alternate rather squeaky *kreel*, *krill* or *keow* notes every 1.5 to 2 seconds, about 40 times each, after which the more distant bird stopped. The closer bird continued to call and after about its sixtieth note a third rail replied with a slightly faster rate of notes. The first bird stopped calling after a total of about 120 notes, and the third bird continued to give its sharp and rapid *kee* call until stopping at 130 notes.

At 11:15 on 21 November, CF heard another duet. The first bird to call started with *kriow* notes about every 1.5 to 2 seconds, soon becoming more rapid and changing to a quicker and sharper *kee* or *kek*. Approximately 135 notes were given by each bird alternately, one bird's note being slightly shorter, sharper, and higher than that of the other.

On 27 November, between 08:00 and 08:30, CF heard calls of 48, 41, 34, 55, and 84 *kee* notes, apparently given by at least three different individuals in immediately adjacent areas of moss forest. Again, each note of a call was repeated at about 1.5 second intervals, being a little slower and softer at the start of the call. Each note was vigorously and sharply produced, giving the impression of being squeezed out of the bird.

These call notes do not appear to be similar to those described for the congeneric White-striped Forest-Rail *Rallina leucospila*, Forbes' Forest-Rail *Rallina forbesi* and the Red-necked Forest-Rail *Rallina tricolor*, by Beehler *et al.* (1986). The Kalam language name for the Forbes' Forest-Rail is 'Kongak' or 'Kungak' (Majnep & Bulmer 1977), given for its 'noisy call', which would seem more similar to notes of the Chestnut Forest-Rail heard by us than those described for congeneric species. The notes we record are, however, typical of members of the rail family (Ripley

1977). Moreover, many rail species are known to duet, this usually being performed by a mated pair and termed 'antiphonal singing or duetting' or calling (Diamond & Terborgh 1968; Diamond 1972; Ripley 1977). Diamond & Terborgh (1968) record the Bush-Hen *Amaurornis olivaceus* singing antiphonally in New Guinea.

The confirmed presence of the Chestnut Forest-Rail at Tari Gap represents an extension of its previous known range, from the Telefomin area, of 200 km to the ESE. Coates (1985) indicated an anticipated extension of the range of this rail by a similar distance to the east of Telefomin and it would seem likely that the bird will be found to occur there, if not further eastwards and elsewhere in the Central Highlands. The discovery of this species in the Tari Gap follows that of the Logrunner *Orthonyx temminckii* (Frith & Frith 1987). Clearly, the ranges of such secretive terrestrial forest dwelling highland birds are more extensive than the current state of ornithological exploration of New Guinea can reflect.

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MISCELLANEOUS OBSERVATIONS OF BIRDS IN IRIAN JAYA AND PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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Between 9 July and 23 August 1987 I had the opportunity to observe birds in one locality in Irian Jaya and three in Papua New Guinea. Here I present some of the most interesting findings. I was accompanied by Andrew E. Hare (AEH) in Papua New Guinea.

Field Sites

- 10-13 July: Danau Bira (Lake Holmes), in the lowlands of northern Irian Jaya, on the western bank of the Mamberamo River, 2° 28' S, 138° 25' E, 350 m.
- 23-26 July: lower montane forest 4 km south of Suria, Central Province, 9° 5' S, 147° 29' E, 1100 m.
- 28 July to 2 August: Varirata National Park, Central Province, 9° 27' S, 147° 22' E, 750 m.
- 4-17 August: Lake Omha, English Peaks, Northern Province, 8° 46' S, 147° 29' E, 3650 m.

Annotated List

- Salvadori's Teal *Anas waigiensis*
At Lake Omha AEH observed a pair to copulate three times in succession on the morning of 9 August. This was followed by a series of stereotyped interactions that may be related to pair-bonding. The two faced each other in the water; first the female bowed to the male repeatedly, and then he to her. Both birds then submerged completely, only to burst out from under the water and flap and splash noisily, side-by-side. Subsequently both left the water and roosted on the bank.
- Brown-collared Brush-Turkey *Talegalla jobiensis*
At Suria a hunter collected a pair in the forest. The stomach of one bird contained many cracked seeds and some insect fragments (Lepidoptera larvae and Coleoptera elytra).
- Victoria Crowned Pigeon *Goura victoria*
At Danau Bira. The voice of a single individual was reminiscent of the call of a cassowary, a very low booming, two notes repeated in pairs: *uh wuh - uh wuh - uh wuh* ..., the series descending in pitch. This was a loud, far-carrying call and very conspicuous. The bird also gave low mmm notes that could be heard only at very close range. Individuals in the forest were very wary and flushed at a distance. The sharp double-slaps produced by the wings when the birds rose from the ground were very distinctive.
- White-breasted Fruit-Dove *Ptilinopus rivoli*
At Suria a nest with a single egg was found. It was constructed on a palm frond in the shaded understory.
- Red-fronted Lorikeet *Charmosyna rubronotata*
At Danau Bira. Voice is indistinguishable from that of the Red-flanked Lorikeet