

REPORT OF AN EXPEDITION TO NEW IRELAND

23 - 28 OCTOBER 1989

ANDREW LYBURN

Intent on discovering a real South Pacific paradise, my father and I journeyed to Kavieng via Rabaul, the last leg being in a Cessna 402, with a pilot who had never flown one before.

We began birding at Kavieng airstrip where Lesser Golden Plovers were feeding on the short grass. Uniform Swiftlets circled overhead. We signed for our transport, a Mazda twincab, at the coffee shop and then checked in to the Malagan Lodge, an impressive kwila structure situated on the waterfront.

Early next morning we began the 275 km drive to Namatanai along the north-east side of the island. Brahminy Kites and Torresian Crows were the most conspicuous of the avifauna viewed as we drove past picturesque fishing villages. Rundown coconut plantations cover most of the coastal plain, which is about 2 km wide, but primary rain forest cloaks the central range of hills. In a swampy area at Komo we stopped on the road to watch Eclectus Parrots, Red-flanked Lorikeets, Black Sunbirds (the females showing a distinct dark moustachial streak on a greyish head), and Yellow-faced Mynas. During lunch on the beach, a Crested and two Lesser Crested Terns provided a useful comparison but were overshadowed by an Osprey sweeping past.

Further down the coast, at Karu, a black bird with two long tail streamers flying in a direct line through a patch of secondary forest could only be the fabled Paradise Drongo, number one on the target list.

For the next three days our base was the Namatanai Hotel, which must survive commercially only because it enjoys a complete monopoly in the southern half of the island. At "dinner" on the first evening we met a logger who recommended we drive across to the western side of the island the next morning for bird watching and invited us to view his operations on the following day. Following his advice we took the road going north-west from Namatanai, but only relict forest remains in the gullies. More Black Sunbirds, a Bismarck Flowerpecker, a Paradise Drongo, three Golden Monarchs, several Eastern Black-capped Lories and a Stephan's Ground-Dove were all that we saw. We do not rate the area worthy of closer investigation.

By contrast, there are numerous logging tracks penetrating the interior from a point 15 km south of Namatanai where Santa Investments is operating. Our first visit, the

same afternoon, produced a large eagle as yet unidentified, with plumage resembling a juvenile Brahminy Kite. Driving back to Namatanai we had magnificent views of an Osprey tearing a fish to shreds in the top of a bare roadside tree. Our second visit in the early morning, turned up by far the best collection of birds during the entire trip. Paradise Drongos abounded. At one time we had six birds in view. This was particularly pleasing because the area had been very heavily logged and it has been a cause for concern that Paradise Drongos would be threatened by logging operations. Red-knobbed Imperial Pigeons and Red-knobbed Fruit-Doves provided us with good views. Black and Yellow-bellied Sunbirds, Golden Monarchs, Brown Cuckoo-Doves, White-bellied Cuckoo-Shrikes, a pair of Blyth's Hornbills and a White-necked Coucal were all seen in the space of an hour.

Our visit to the small scale logging operation on the steep slopes above Bulu in the Karu area, 70 km north of Namatanai was aborted in the absence of the logger who had invited us. An extremely muddy track led up into the hills through closed forest but viewing was difficult due to the fairly steep gradient and the density of the forest. The only birds seen well were a Bismarck Flowerpecker, Blyth's Hornbill and a Crested Hawk which was hunting by clambering along the limbs of a tall tree. We soon retired to a nearby beach where we watched a Whimbrel and a fishing Osprey. Our reward for a 04:00 start that day came in the form of a Nicobar Pigeon flying away from the side of the road at Karu.

There is no doubt that birding in New Ireland is challenging, due mainly to the inaccessibility of good areas and the lush density of the natural forest. Our advice to future expeditions is to seek out new logging tracks and drive to the end of them, arriving as soon after dawn as possible. Since New Ireland is so far east dawn is a little after 05:00 and few birds are active after 09:00. To have one's own transport is essential. Travel and accommodation are prohibitively expensive even by PNG standards: the two of us spent K1400 in five days. As ever the highlight was unexpected. For us the sight of six Paradise Drongos dancing in the air and the extraordinary sound of them booming like bitterns in the forest competed for pride of place with the three Ospreys, which gave us sightings which in Europe are only seen on film.

Species List

Eastern Reef-Egret / Osprey / Crested Hawk / Brahminy Kite / (White-bellied Sea-Eagle) / (Pink-legged Rail) / Mongolian Plover / Whimbrel / Common Sandpiper / Greenshank / Crested Tern / Lesser Crested Tern / Brown Cuckoo-Dove / Black-billed Cuckoo-Dove / Stephan's Ground Dove / Red-knobbed Fruit-Dove / Red-knobbed Imperial Pigeon / Nicobar Pigeon / Rainbow Lorikeet / Eastern Black-capped Lory / Red-flanked Lorikeet / White-necked Coucal / Uniform Swiftlet / Mangrove Kingfisher / Sacred Kingfisher / Blyth's Hornbill / Pacific Swallow / White-bellied Cuckoo-Shrike / Willie Wagtail / Shining Flycatcher / Golden Monarch / Bismarck Flowerpecker / Black Sunbird / Yellow-bellied Sunbird / Paradise Drongo / 34 species
Parenthesis round the name indicate uncertainty.

Address: 4 Cumlodden Avenue, Edinburgh, EN12 6DR, Scotland.