

## AN UNKNOWN RAIL SIGHTED IN WEST NEW BRITAIN

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On 24 December 1987, after several days birding in lowland rainforest within the confines of Pokili Wildlife Management Area, situated near Levege (West New Britain), I decided to conduct a "forest watch" in search of Rufous-faced Thicket-Warbler *Ortygocichla rubiginosa*. A forest watch simply involves sitting almost motionless for periods of up to two hours in habitat that looks productive and waiting to see what comes by. In this particular case it was in a dark, damp rain forest gully with plenty of ground cover such as ferns, roots and fallen branches. At approximately 08:00 my attention was drawn to movement in the undergrowth some 12 - 15 m away. Having focused my binoculars (Zeiss 10x, 50) the bird came into view as it foraged for food amongst the leaf litter.

First impressions were of a small rail, similar in size, shape, and manner to Red-necked Rail *Rallina tricolor*, with constant tail flicking and occasional darting movements when alarmed. Although the bird was only viewed clearly for some 10 - 20 seconds, it was glimpsed four times in ten minutes. Some rather startling features were noted. A brief description was taken in the field from which the following notes were compiled.

**Size and shape:** estimated to be similar in size and shape to a Red-necked Rail with a short neck and tail giving the bird a rather plump appearance, although when it ran for cover its neck would stretch giving a more elongated shape. **Head and bill:** the head including the crown, nape and throat was entirely uniform grey, with a prominent broad eye-ring surrounding a dark eye. This eye-ring was a most striking feature, contrasting strongly with the grey head. The bill looked short and dark, possibly greenish, again similar in shape and size to Red-necked Rail. **Upperparts:** uppertail, back and wing coverts were entirely rufous and contrasted strongly with the grey head and nape. **Underparts:** the breast was the same colour as the throat and head, uniform grey with the belly being paler; the undertail was not seen clearly except that it appeared pale as the bird flicked its tail. The legs were dark, although again not seen clearly.

Although this sighting and my notes are brief, there is no doubt that this bird was a rail, probably a *Rallina*. Upon returning to Port Moresby I consulted Coates (1985) and Beehler *et al.* (1986) to consider the possibility of the bird being a juvenile. This possibility was ruled out by the lack of any forest-type rails of this size being recorded for New Britain.

After consulting other references in Australia, Pratt *et al.* (1987), Haddon (1981), White & Bruce (1986) and Ripley (1977), this bird still remains a mystery, and I offer this short note in the hope of alerting other observers to an unidentified rail in West New Britain.

Should anyone require a precise location of this sighting, please contact me.

- Beehler, B.M., T.K. Pratt & D.A. Zimmerman. 1986. *Birds of New Guinea*. Princetown University Press.  
 Coates, B.J. 1985. *The Birds of Papua New Guinea*. Vol 1. Dove Publications.  
 Haddon, D. 1981. *Birds of the North Solomons*. Wau Ecology Institute Handbook No.8.  
 Pratt, H.D., P.L. Bruner & D.G. Berret. 1987. *A Field Guide to the Birds of Hawaii and the Tropical Pacific*. Princetown University Press.  
 Ripley, S.D. 1977. *Rails of the World*. D.R. Godine.  
 White, C.M.N. & M.D. Bruce. 1986. *The Birds of Wallacea. An Annotated Checklist*. British Ornithologists' Union Checklist No. 7.

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