NEW DISTRIBUTION RECORDS - LIHIR ISLAND

ROY D. MACKAY

During a ten day stay on Lihir and nearby islands in the New Ireland Province, PNG from 30 January 1991 to 8 February 1991 I recorded 37 species of birds. Three of these have not been recorded from these islands before (see Coates 1985).

Gurney's Eagle *Aquila gurneyi*. On 8 February 1991 while examining old burial sites near the Kennicott Niugini Joint Venture goldmine at Luise Harbour on the east coast, we (Biries, Margaret Mackay and I) saw a large dark eagle glide over us about 50 m above. It glided over us on thermals for about three minutes until it vanished behind a knoll. I identified it as a Gurney's Eagle by its all-over brown colour but for a pale patch under each wing where the secondaries join the primaries. I ruled out the juvenile of the White-bellied Sea-Eagle *Haliaeetus leucogaster* which usually has much more light colour under the wing and on the rump and underside of the tail. To confirm my identification I asked Biries about the eagles there and he said that the name of this bird, the Gurney's Eagle was *Managolai* and that the White-bellied Sea Eagle was called *Molam*. Biries knew that the Sea-Eagle caught fish but the Gurney's Eagle did not.

White-throated Needletail *Hirundapus caudacuta*. Although this record is a long way from the rest of its known distribution in PNG this is not an unusual record for such a wide ranging species. I saw it on two occasions - 30 January 1991 over Lipuko Village on the east coast and on 3 February 1991 over the open grounds of the Roman Catholic mission at Paile on the south coast. It is a regular migrant from Australia and New Zealand through PNG to southeast Asia.

Four Red-rumped Swallows *Hirundo daurica* were seen together perched on a power line and swooping around the grounds of the Paile mission. I observed them for at least five minutes while waiting for transport from the mission - 3 February 1991.

Coates, B.J. (1985). **The Birds of Papua New Guinea. Volume I.** Dove Publications.

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BARNES'S LONG-TAILED BIRD OF PARADISE

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The female Splendid Astrapia Bird of Paradise featured in the extension of range for that species by Tolhurst (1990) is most likely a typical example of young Barnes's Long-tailed Bird of Paradise *Astrapia mayeri* x *Astrapia stephaniae*, probably a three to four year old male.

A less likely possibility for the individual described is that of an immature female Ribbontail Bird of Paradise *A. mayeri*. The occurrence of white tail feathers in *A. mayeri* is not confined to males. In his second volume Brian Coates features a Cliff and Dawn Frith photograph of an adult, white and black tailed, female plumaged, *A. mayeri* at the nest with a gaping nestling (Coates 1990). The one complete central tail feather of that bird is all white from the base to within 50 to 100 mm of the tip, which is black. The intact section of the broken other tail feather is also all white. The width of both feathers appear to be the same as that of an adult male - about 22 mm. The "brown towards the end" of the tail, in Len T olhurst's description of the individual he observed indicates a young hybrid male rather than a female *A. mayeri*.

The description given by Tolhurst of the tail feathers, namely "the white on the base of the tail covered the full width of the tail feathers" alone, precludes the possibility of the bird in question being a female *A. splendidissima*. In this species the white bases of the tail feathers are edged with brown or black, as is depicted in Gilliard (1969) and Cooper & Forshaw (1977) as well as by Medland (in Iredale 1950).

In 'Barnes's Long-tail' the extent of white in the central tail feathers is greater in some individuals than others (Shaw Mayer, pers. comm.). The pattern of white and black, and the width of the central tail feathers are also variable. The adult male described by Iredale and featured by Medland had a different pattern of white/black and a much wider, shorter tail (12 at base to 40 mm and 750 mm long) to the one which Shaw Mayer had at the Hallstrom Sanctuary, Nondugl and which is pictured in Peckover (1992) (tail about 22 mm wide throughout and 1080 mm long). These variations in obvious hybrids and the additional black in the tail feathers of some adult male 'pure' *A. mayeri* may indicate intergrading with *A. stephaniae* (that is, the occurrence of viable cross-breeding to second, third and subsequent generations) in at least some populations where the two species overlap. However, the two species are reported to "live side by side, one above the other, on Mt. Giluwe without appreciable hybridisation" (Gilliard 1969).

For many years the occasional hybrid birds of paradise which were collected in the wild were thought to be new species. The last to be described as such as *Astrapia barnesi*, Barnes's Long-tailed Bird of Paradise (Iredale 1948). In his later book on birds of paradise

Iredale (1950) refers scathingly to "this fantastic hybridisation theory." Despite the irrefutable evidence of the existence of hybridisation, Iredale was just unable to accept that it does occur in the wild. Its occurrence between some birds of paradise in the wild is now well known, accepted and documented (Stresemann 1930, Gilliard 1969, Coates 1990, Peckover 1992 etc.).

Len Tolhurst's comments on the earlier draft of this response are gratefully acknowledged.

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UNUSUAL FORAGING BEHAVIOUR BY *APLONIS* STARLINGS BELIEVED TO BE *APLONIS METALLICA*

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INTRODUCTION

I report here an unusual foraging behaviour by *Aplonis* sp. starlings, believed to be *Aplonis metallica*, in which aquatic prey were taken from the Fly River, in the Western Province of Papua New Guinea.

OBSERVATIONS

Between 3 September and 20 October 1988 I was at Middletown on the lower Kikori River, about one hour upstream from Kikori township by motorised canoe. Whilst there I noticed on a number of occasions, but always from a distance, flocks of what appeared to be *Aplonis* starlings foraging over the River Kikori just before sunset. I was puzzled at the time, partly because I was not completely convinced of the birds' identity and partly because I could discern no swarms of insects on which they might have been feeding.

Between 30 May and 9 June 1989 I was at Kumul Base on the Fly River, about half an hour upstream from Kiunga township by motorised canoe, in the Western Province of Papua

New Guinea. On various occasions I again saw flocks of *Aplonis* starlings foraging over the river at dusk. This time I was able to observe them much more closely. The foraging behaviour took place in the extreme late afternoon, in the last half hour before complete darkness fell. Foraging ranged up and down the river over several hundred metres. The flocks were fairly cohesive and varied in size between 20 and 40 birds. Occasionally two flocks were seen in the same vicinity. As before, I could discern no swarms of insects, but again and again I clearly saw birds stop, hover for a brief period, then pick something from the water with the beak and continue flying. The objects picked from the water were not large, but I did on one occasion clearly see a drooping object in the beak, i.e., a non-rigid body drooping either side of the beak. It was impossible to track individual birds to see how often an individual obtained prey, but on any one time the majority of the flock would be quartering at the same time as only one or two individuals would be obtaining prey.

The birds were black *Aplonis* starlings with longish graduated tails. There was no sign of any light coloured iris — all appeared dark. There were no juveniles apparent. Viewing distance varied, with the closest being ten metres or so and the farthest several hundred metres. The clearest views were obtained between ten and fifty metres. The starlings were definitely *Aplonis* and, on balance, almost certainly *Aplonis metallica*.

I had noticed at Kumul that this particular foraging seemed more common at times when the river was in flood and there was a considerable amount of spume and flotsam in the water. However, it is important to note that the capture of the prey was not confined to spume covered water, nor was this foraging behaviour confined to the times when the rivers were in flood.

DISCUSSION

Although unidentified, the prey was obviously aquatic. There is, of course, the faint possibility that at Kumul, in the Western Province, the starlings might have been *Aplonis mystacea*, but the size of the flocks and the apparent absence of any light coloured irides would make it much more likely that they were *A. metallica*. There is, of course, little doubt that *A. metallica* was involved at Middletown, in the Gulf Province, but it must be pointed out that no clear view of the foraging behaviour was obtained there.

This particular foraging behaviour is not mentioned in any of the literature, and is presented here as the first reported observation of *Aplonis* starlings taking aquatic prey on the island of New Guinea.

[Note that Ian Burrows reports various starling species feeding on hatching mayfly in an apparently similar manner on p. 32 of this issue, Ed.].

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