

## PAPUAN PARROT-FINCH *ERYTHRURA PAPUANA* ON MOUNT KAINDI, MOROBE PROVINCE

FERNLEY B. SYMONS

Mount Kaindi (2350 m) is one of the most accessible of Papua New Guinea's mountains. When this fact is allied with the nearby facilities at the Wau Ecology Institute (WEI), it is not surprising that much ecological data and many ornithological records have been obtained there. What is surprising, however, is that there have been no records of the Papuan Parrot-Finch *Erythrura papuana* in the past five years (R. Hicks, pers. comm.). The bird certainly occurred in times past (Gressit *et al.* 1978); more tangible evidence is provided by a rather moth-eaten specimen on display in the WEI's case of local fauna. As a member of an Imperial College (London) expedition I was able to investigate the summit of Mt. Kaindi on numerous occasions.

On 9 July 1990 at approximately 12 noon I was investigating the remaining *Nothofagus* forest to the right of the main road, at the point where this opens out into the south summit clearing (on the gold mine side). Following a track which led to what appeared to be a particularly promising patch I noticed a mixed flock of passerines. These included several Buff-faced Scrub-Wrens *Sericornis perspicillatus*, a single Common Smoky Honeyeater *Melipotes fumigatus*, at least one Friendly Fantail *Rhipidura albolimbata*, a Spot-winged Monarch *Monarcha guttula* and a single Island Thrush *Turdus poliocephalus*. In addition I observed a Papuan Parrot-Finch *Erythrura papuana*.

Unfortunately my views of the Parrot-Finch were brief and often partially obscured by vegetation. However, enough was seen for a positive identification. Initially I was struck by its large size; it had a rusty reddish tail and vent; the face was deep blue whilst the rest of the body was an iridescent green. I first thought I was seeing a Blue-faced Parrot-Finch *E. trichroa*. However, the impressive size of the bird, together with its heavy bill, suggested otherwise. The tail appeared longer than *E. trichroa* and the tail, rump and vent regions were a brighter red colour. The fact that only one individual was present tends to support the identification (Beehler *et al.* 1986 note that this species is generally solitary). The bird had been foraging at mid-level when first noted but soon moved up to forage in the *Nothofagus* canopy.

Later visits to Mt. Kaindi allowed me ample opportunity to observe the commoner Blue-faced Parrot-Finch *E. trichroa*, at reasonably close quarters. These were normally present in loose flocks which numbered between ten and twenty individuals. Flocks were very vocal and in general several birds could be heard calling simultaneously; indeed attempts to obtain sound recordings of single birds had to be abandoned. Like the Papuan Parrot-Finch they were found at mid-level and in the canopy.

In addition to my observations of live *E. trichroa* I was also able to examine a dead specimen. This was obtained from the Mt. Missim road in the Wau Valley after I observed a local man pick it up and examine it in a quizzical manner before tossing it away. The vegetation there was totally different, consisting in the main of coffee plantations with *Albizia* shade trees and rank grassland. I did not see live individuals of the Papuan Parrot-Finch in this habitat although Hooded Mannikins *Lonchura spectabilis* were reasonably abundant.

The specimen possessed the same iridescent green noted in *E. papuana* above, but was somewhat different in other details. As in *E. papuana* the blue of the face was marked, although certainly not as bright as the illustration in Beehler *et al.* (1986) suggests, those of Day and Simpson (1986) or Slater *et al.* (1986) being more accurate. The colour of the tail, rump and vent was less reddish than that of *E. papuana* and was closer to the dark brown reproduced in the Slater *et al.* (1986) illustration. In addition the tail was markedly shorter than that of the Papuan Parrot-Finch, although this character is probably not constant. Whilst it is difficult to determine if any changes had occurred to the pigmentation after death, the morphology of the bill is more certain. This was more delicate than that seen in *E. papuana*, being reminiscent of the European Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*. On the other hand, the general impression imparted by *E. papuana* is that of one of the larger mannikins, for example the Grand Mannikin *Lonchura grandis* (in build if not in size). It would seem that if a comparison between *E. trichroa* and *E. papuana* is available then each is sufficiently distinct for identification to present little difficulty.

The flock containing *E. papuana* was observed foraging after a period of heavy rainfall. Observations from subsequent visits suggest that passerines may be more active before and just after rain. Many of these mixed species flocks seem to favour the clearings left when the local people extract wood. In areas abutting the road a thin periphery of older growth frequently hides a clear-felled wasteland within.

It is in this way that much of the climax vegetation ("moss forest") has been lost from the summit of Mt. Kaindi. *E. papuana* is probably not overly rare but nonetheless may well be vulnerable to disturbance. *E. trichroa* may be more tolerant in its habitat requirements. It is noticeable that many of the larger species of birds recorded by Beehler & Pratt (in Gressit *et al.* 1978) seemed to be absent during my visits to Mt. Kaindi.

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Address: 8 Priory Gardens, Shirehampton, Bristol BS11 0BZ, U.K.