

A VISIT TO THE EAST SEPIK PROVINCE

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WEWAK AREA

During June and August 1990, it was my privilege to visit the East Sepik Province for six weeks.

First place of call was the provincial capital of Wewak. This town is situated right on the coast, with the eastern end of the Prince Alexander Mountains forming a backdrop to the south side of the town. The list of birds seen in Wewak area are those seen on the different times that I was in the area over the six weeks I was in the Province.

The drive by road from Wewak to Maprik is a very interesting one, and passes through some heavily populated hill country. It is also a road famous for rascal holdups. Fortunately, we had no incidents. While making this journey a male Lesser Bird of Paradise *Paradisaea minor* flew across the highway and over a nearby valley giving a splendid view.

HAYFIELD - MAPRIK

Years ago Maprik town had its own airfield next to the business district. However, due to the geography of the area the strip was very short, and has now been closed and part of it has been converted into a playing field. The airfield that now serves Maprik is located at Hayfield, which is about eight km south of the town. Maprik itself is surrounded by hills, and the streams that drain them carry gold in their gravel beds. Many local people pan for the yellow metal whenever they need extra cash, and some no doubt earn their living doing so.

The bird that gave me the greatest thrill in this area was the Australian Pratincole *Stiltia isabella* seen on the Hayfield airfield, and Meyer's Friarbird *Philemon meyeri* at Maprik.

HAYFIELD - PAGWI ROAD

From Hayfield a road extends southwards to the Sepik River, at Pagwi. This road is a very rough one in many places, and is one that you would not want to travel during times of heavy rain. It is advisable to avoid travelling it in the wet season, unless you have a good 4-wheel drive vehicle. Pagwi is the road head for all villages and towns upstream on the Sepik River. Even Ambunti is not connected to the rest of the Province by road. From Pagwi upstream one has to travel by river boat or canoe, or fly. Of course, in some places one can still walk, but this is not recommended. Interesting sightings along this road were the Blue-tailed Bee-eater *Merops philippinus*, which I also saw along the Sepik River, (I had previously seen the species in the Philippines), and a White-faced Heron *Egretta novaehollandiae*.

AMBUNTI AREA

Ambunti is an important Government Centre about 25 km upstream from Pagwi, but much further if you travel by canoe and negotiate all the loops of the Sepik River. I flew to Ambunti from Hayfield. Coming in to land at the airstrip at Ambunti is quite an experience. As you approach the airstrip, you cross the Sepik River, so must stay high enough to avoid a landing in the water or in the bank. At the far end of the strip is a steep hill, so you must get on to the end of the strip, so that you can pull up before you run out of ground. It would be very difficult to go around and try again, because the hill in front of you presents an obstacle.

Birds of special interest in this area were the Black-browed Triller *Lalage atrovirens* and Grey Crow *Corvus tristis*.

While at Ambunti where I stayed for three days, I spent one memorable day on the Sepik River, travelling by dinghy and outboard motor from Ambunti downstream past Pagwi to Kanganama Village and back, a total distance by river of 160 km. The whole trip took 8 hours including stops made at some of the villages along the way. Some of them had interesting names, such as Japanaut, which commemorates the Japanese withdrawal so I was told, and Suapmeri, or Shortmeri. I am not sure how the latter village got its name, unless it was named after a woman of short stature.

Interesting sightings along the river bank were Whiskered Tern *Chilidonias hybridus* which were very common, Sulphur-crested Cuckatoo *Cacatua galerita*, Channel-billed Cuckoo *Scythrops novaehollandiae*, Blue-tailed Bee-eater, Lesser Black Coucal *Centropus bernsteini*, and Blyth's Hornbill *Rhyticeros plicatus*.

MAY RIVER

From Ambunti I flew to May River where I spent the weekend of 6 to 7 July. May River is a very isolated area. It takes two days to travel by canoe with outboard motor to reach it from Pagwi, going against the river current. I would have enjoyed spending much more time in this interesting place, and walking trips into the surrounding forests would be most rewarding I am sure. However I was able to see and hear about 30 species in the short time I was there. Perhaps the most exciting sighting was a male Twelve-wired Bird of Paradise *Seleucidus melanoleuca* flying over the May River. Other sightings that I really enjoyed were Brown Lory *Chalcopsitta duivenbodei*, White-throated Pigeon *Columba vitiensis*, and Grand Mannikin *Lonchura grandis*. The Streak-headed Mannikin *L. tristissima* was also seen in the area.

BONAHOI VILLAGE AREA

Bonahoi is a village about 35 km west of Maprik, where I spent five days. Birding in the area was fairly good, but I only really got away into the forest area for one day. However, some 37 species of birds were seen or heard while there. One day we saw a water snake swimming in a river. I was told that it was a non-poisonous species. Special sightings were: Glossy-mantle Manucode *Manucodia atra*, Brown Lory, Brown-collared Brush Turkey *Talegalla jobiensis*, Lesser Bird of Paradise very close to village houses, Black-browed Triller, Grey-headed Goshawk *Accipiter poliocephalus*, and Lesser Black Coucal.

KOIL ISLAND

About 62 km east-north-east of Wewak is the small low-lying island of Koil. From Wewak at sea level it cannot be seen, as it lies below the horizon. On a free day I arranged for an outboard dinghy to take me to this island hoping to see the Beach Kingfisher, and maybe the Nicobar Pigeon. We left early in the morning and after travelling at good speed for one hour, we stopped and just drifted on the ocean surface while we ate our breakfast sandwiches. We then pressed on for another hour before reaching the island. The ocean surface in places was covered with drift wood from the Sepik River. The currents in the ocean had lined up the drift wood in long lines that stretch for many miles across the ocean surface. Many terns used the drift wood for perching.

On the island of Koil I was disappointed at not seeing either of the two species I had hoped to see. I was told that the Beach Kingfisher was on the island, and the local people said they often saw them, especially in the early morning or late in the day. Since I was there in the middle of the day, it seemed that it did not help. However, I did make a real effort to find one, but with no success. I was told that the Nicobar Pigeon was not on the Island at all, so again no success.

One interesting sighting was the Sacred Kingfisher *Halcyon sancta* which seemed to be larger than ones seen elsewhere in Papua New Guinea and Australia and New Zealand. Also the bills on the birds seen looked longer and thinner than usual. If anyone had any information on variations with this species I would be interested to hear of them. [A reviewer suggests that this might have been a Collared Kingfisher *H. chloris*, Ed.]

WEWAK and WEWAK-MAPRIK ROAD

Spotted Marsh-Harrier
Black Kite
Whimbrel
Orange-fronted Fruit-Dove
White-bellied Cuckoo-Shrike
Pacific Swallow
Dollarbird
Willie Wagtail
Grey Shrike-Thrush
Yellow-bellied Sunbird
Varied Honeyeater
Helmeted Friarbird
Singing Starling
Lesser Bird of Paradise
Torresian Crow

MAPRIK-HAYFIELD AREA

Little Black Cormorant
Intermediate Egret
Rufous Night-Heron
Black Kite
Brahminy Kite
Whistling Kite
Grey-headed Goshawk
Australian Pratincole
Masked Lapwing
Brush Cuckoo (h)
Lesser Black Coucal (h)
Rainbow Lorikeet
Red-cheeked Parrot
Eclectus Parrot
Sacred Kingfisher
Rufous-bellied Kookaburra
Papuan Frogmouth (h)
Moustached Tree-Swift
Papuan Spine-tailed Swift
Rainbow Bee-eater
White-bellied Cuckoo-Shrike
Tree Martin
Pacific Swallow
Blue Jewel-Babbler
Emperor Fairy-Wren
White-winged Fairy-Wren

Willie Wagtail
Pied Chat
Black-headed Whistler
Black-winged Monarch (?)
Golden-headed Cisticola
Black Berrypecker
Papuan Flowerpecker
Western Mountain White-Eye
Black Sunbird
Yellow-bellied Sunbird
Forest White-eared Meliphaga
Helmeted Friarbird
Meyer's Friarbird
Plain Honeyeater
Brown Oriole
Yellow-faced Myna
White-breasted Wood-Swallow
Glossy-mantled Manucode

HAYFIELD-PAGWI ROAD

White-faced Heron
Black Kite
Brahminy Kite
Brown Goshawk (?)
Whistling Kite
Rufous-bellied Kookaburra
Blue-tailed Bee-eater
Dollarbird
Willie Wagtail
Pied Chat
Helmeted Friarbird

AMBUNTI

Black Kite
Whistling Kite
Bush-Hen (h)
Eclectus Parrot
Red-cheeked Parrot
Rufous-bellied Kookaburra
Sacred Kingfisher
Rainbow Bee-eater
Papuan Spine-tailed Swift
Tree Martin
White-bellied Cuckoo-Shrike
Black-browed Triller
Dollarbird

Rusty Mouse-Warbler (h)
Northern Fantail
Variable Pitohui
Black Sunbird
Plain Honeyeater
Streak-headed Honeyeater
Helmeted Friarbird
Puff-backed Meliphaga
Spangled Drongo
Hooded Butcherbird (h)
Grey Crow

SEPIK RIVER BELOW AMBUNTI

Little Black Cormorant
Little Pied Cormorant
Rufous Night-Heron
Pied Heron
Little Egret
Intermediate Egret
Great Egret
Whistling Kite
Little Eagle (?)
Brahminy Kite
Whiskered Tern
Masked Lapwing
Purple Swamphen
Rainbow Lorikeet
Sulphur-crested Cockatoo
Brush Cuckoo (h)
Channel-billed Cuckoo
Lesser Black Coucal
Rufous-bellied Kookaburra
Azure Kingfisher
Blue-tailed Bee-eater
Blyth's Hornbill
Dollarbird
Willie Wagtail
Singing Starling

MAY RIVER

Little Black Cormorant
Little Pied Cormorant
Whistling Kite
Pacific Black Duck
Intermediate Egret
Bush-Hen (h)

Red-cheeked Parrot
Brown Lory
Rufous-bellied Kookaburra (h)
Rainbow Lorikeet
Eclectus Parrot
White-throated Pigeon
Pied Imperial Pigeon
Lesser Black Coucal (h)
Uniform Swiftlet
Sacred Kingfisher
Rainbow Bee-eater
Dollarbird
Cicadabird
Variable Pitohui (feeding young at nest)
Black Sunbird
Plain Honeyeater
Helmeted Friarbird
Streak-headed Mannikin
Grand Mannikin
Brown Oriole
Spangled Drongo
Hooded Butcherbird
White-breasted Wood-Swallow
Twelve-wired Bird of Paradise

BONAHOI VILLAGE AREA
Brahminy Kite
Crested Hawk
Grey-headed Goshawk
Collared Sparrowhawk
Brown-collared Brush-Turkey
Rainbow Lorikeet
Western Black-capped Lory
Brown Lory
Eclectus Parrot
Red-cheeked Parrot
Orange-bellied Fruit-Dove
Wompoo Fruit-Dove (h ?)
Brush Cuckoo
Papuan Frogmouth (h)
Papuan Boobook (h)
Uniform Swiftlet
Rufous-bellied Kookaburra
Sacred Kingfisher
Lesser Black Coucal
Yellow-billed Kingfisher
Rainbow Bee-eater
Dollarbird
White-bellied Cuckoo-Shrike

Black-browed Triller
Blue Jewel-Babbler
Variable Pitohui
Black Sunbird
Helmeted Friarbird
Spangled Drongo
Brown Oriole (h)
Yellow-faced Myna
Metallic Starling
Lowland Peltops
Hooded Butcherbird
Fawn-breasted Bowerbird (h)
Glossy-mantled Manucode
Lesser Bird of Paradise

KOIL ISLAND
Lesser Frigatebird
Brown Noddy
Pied Imperial Pigeon
Sacred Kingfisher
Brush Cuckoo (h)
Yellow-bellied Sunbird
Metallic Starling

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THE NEST AND NESTLING OF THE CRESTED BERRYPECKER *PARAMYTHIA MONTIUM*

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Few detailed descriptions of the nesting of the Crested Berrypecker *Paramythia montium* have been published. They are summarized in Coates (1990) but consist of descriptions of nests, eggs and nestling in the Snow Mountains (Rand 1942) and unpublished records supplied to Coates by C.B. Frith, D.W. Frith, and T. Palliser from the Tari Gap area. It is therefore still of value for further records to be published to enable a clear picture of nesting by Crested Berrypeckers to be established.

On 18 February 1989 at 08:00 I discovered an active nest of the Crested Berrypecker at 2725 m on the Hides Anticline in the Karius Range, Southern Highlands Province. The two adult birds were sighted first. One attended the nest and took food (unidentifiable) to a nestling. I examined the nest as best I could without handling the nestling.

The nest was situated in a small, rather densely foliated, broadleaved tree, which I presumed to be a sapling. The nest was approximately 2.25 m up, and was very securely held in the centre of the sapling by a multi-fork formed by four or five upwards pointing main branches. The nest tree was situated right at the edge of a clearing with forest on two thirds of its edge. The nest was a cup, the measured dimensions being: external diameter 13.5 cm; internal diameter 7.0 cm; external depth 10.0 cm. The nest was composed externally of coarse vegetable matter, lined with fine vegetable matter and with fairly fresh, still green moss hanging all around the exterior and forming wisps on the bottom.

There was a single nestling, quite large with downy feathers none of which were in pin. The eyes were fully open and the nestling uttered a "skrss" call. It had a pinkish gape and a grey beak. Those feathers visible were a mixture of brown and green. The eye was dark.

The adult birds were silent when viewed through binoculars but it was probable that a cross between a hissing and rasping noise just before they appeared was in fact uttered by them.

On 19 February I was again able to observe this nest, albeit briefly. Both adults attended, but I could not distinguish what was fed to the nestling. Each adult bird appeared to swallow something when attending the nest, presumably faecal sacs.

The nest tree and its situation, nest type, materials and placement, as well as the single nestling, all accord well with the previous observations. Nest size is obviously variable. Time of breeding is also variable, even in the same general area, but this agrees with the general observation in Coates (1985) that frugivorous birds in P.N.G. breed at any time.

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

Coates, B.J. 1990. **The Birds of Papua New Guinea. Vol. II.** Dove Publications.

Rand, A.L. 1942. Results of the Archbold Expeditions No. 43. Birds of the 1938-1939 New Guinea Expedition. **Bull. Amer. Mus. Nat. Hist.** 79.

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