

EDITORIAL

This issue, Volume 7 number 2 May 1995, contains a controversial and thought-provoking article from Clifford Frith. Responses to issues raised therein are welcome. Grammatical conventions are however the prerogative of the editor. We are again pleased to publish papers in this issue about the birds of little studied areas, and trip reports from Chris Eastwood, Allan Richards and Richard Rowland which document interesting sightings. The third and final issue for 1995 should be published before the end of the year, depending on how much material we receive.

Future issues will summarize major sightings over the past year, with some revised criteria applying to what is published:

E = Extension of range, records away from previously known range.

A = Altitudinal extension of range.

B = Breeding records, lacking for many quite common species.

R = Rare, scarce or seldom recorded species.

M = Migrants, with first and last dates of interest or numerical records of note.

G = General interest, may be behavioural, unusual numbers or localities, plumage abnormalities etc.

Records not fitting the above categories are usually from lesser known areas.

Contributors of sightings have been very few in recent years, and we encourage both residents and visitors to submit their records. Please use the above criteria as guidelines.

We particularly welcome copies of tour group reports, as many interesting sightings lie hidden in these inaccessible databases and it is a courtesy to the host country to make copies available to the PNGBS. Such reports form part of our archives, and excerpts would be used only if such permission is given. Feedback to notes and papers is welcomed, if you know better please write and tell us, we will be happy to publish, a major aim being to stimulate study and increase the knowledge of New Guinea birds.

Editor: Phil Gregory.

Please continue to send submissions (preferably on disk in the specified format) to:

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All contributions will be acknowledged.

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Cover: Dwarf Cassowary head study by Jones Hiaso

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RANGE EXTENSION OF THE SPLENDID ASTRAPIA *Astrapia splendidissima*, A SIGHTING OF AN *A. mayeri* x *A. stephaniae* HYBRID, OR AN UNIDENTIFIED *Astrapia* sp. (Paradisaeidae)?

by Clifford B. Frith

Peckover (1993) attempted to clarify the identification of an individual *Astrapia* sp. seen by Tolhurst (1989), and thought by him to be a Splendid *Astrapia* *A. splendidissima*, near the Bailey bridge immediately above Ambua Lodge on the Tari -Mt. Hagen highway, Southern Highland Province, Papua New Guinea. Both the Ribbon-tailed *Astrapia* *A. mayeri* and Stephanie's *Astrapia* *A. stephaniae* occur at this location but no hybrid between them (recorded elsewhere) has been confirmed there. Frith & Frith (1992, 1993a) noted that the altitude of this location is closer to c 2 200m than to the 3 600m asl indicated by Tolhurst.

Variability of white in the tail of some two-thirds of all female Ribbon-tailed *Astrapias* (Mayr & Gilliard 1952), from the smallest amount to completely male-like white and dark-tipped central tail feathers is known (Coates 1990). This left Tolhurst's sighting of a supposed Splendid *Astrapia* in serious doubt (Frith & Frith 1992, 1993a) as the Ribbon-tailed *Astrapia* frequents the Bailey bridge area and Tolhurst noted only that the "tail feathers were bi-coloured, white near the base and brown towards the end. The line of demarcation between the two colours was about half-way down the length of the tail". No further discussion of this isolated and brief sighting, at 25m distance, seemed warranted as the total length of the bird's tail relative to its body length, the possibility of moult, or other significant diagnostic plumage characters were not indicated or discussed. Indeed no evidence was presented to indicate why the bird concerned was not considered a female as opposed to an immature or moulting male. A subsequent discussion of this sighting by Peckover (1993), who had not seen Frith & Frith (1992, 1993a) demands the present response, however, as it not only fails to clarify the matter but confuses and complicates it.

Peckover states that the bird seen by Tolhurst is "most likely a typical example of young Barnes's (originally spelt Barnes', by Iredale in (1948) Long-tailed Bird of Paradise *Astrapia mayeri* x *Astrapia stephaniae*, probably a three to four year old male and there is a "less likely possibility" of it being an "immature female Ribbontail Bird of Paradise (sic) *A. mayeri*." He then states that the pigmented tail tip of an adult female Ribbon-tailed *Astrapia* photographed on the nest by myself is "black" and uses this interpretation to argue that the "brown" towards the end of the tail seen by Tolhurst indicates a young hybrid male individual rather than a female Ribbon-tailed *Astrapia*. The facts are, however, that whilst the tail tips of the presumed female Ribbon-tailed *Astrapia* I photographed often appeared blackish they also often appeared distinctly dark to mid brown as do those of any Ribbon-tailed *Astrapia* subject to light and distance. Contrary to Peckover, I would say that my photograph, reproduced in Coates (1990, plate 449), shows a dark brown tip to the entire central tail feather and not a black one. It is not clear why Peckover acknowledges only the possibility of an immature female, and not also an adult female, Ribbon-tailed *Astrapia*.

Peckover goes on to dismiss Tolhurst's suggestion that the bird he saw was a Splendid *Astrapia* because the latter's description of the tail feathers reads "the white on the base of the tail covered the full width of the tail feathers". Peckover cites Gilliard (1969), Cooper & Forshaw (1977) and Medland (in Iredale 1950) as providing support for his view by indicating that in the Splendid *Astrapia* "the white bases of the tail feathers are edged with brown or black". The facts are