

## 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

that the illustrations and text in the former two, and the illustration in the last, of these three publications clearly indicates, correctly, that the pale basal area of at least the central pair of tail feathers in the Splendid *Astrapia* are white throughout (the width of the feathers). I cannot see that Peckover's approximation of the "about 22mm" width of the white central tail feathers of an otherwise female-plumaged Ribbon-tailed *Astrapia* in a printed photograph (in Coates 1990) is pertinent to his case. Peckover noted that the lack of the tip of one central tail feather of the photographed bird denied him knowledge of its appearance. As this bird's tail was complete prior to my photograph (Coates 1990) being taken I can confirm that the two central tail feathers were identical.

Tolhurst did not indicate which tail feathers he was referring to with respect to them being white across their full width. In view of the fact that it is the central pair that is most diagnostic in *Astrapia* spp., and because he wrote of a bird flying away from him 25m distant, with its tail closed or unfanned (Tolhurst *in litt.*) it is likely he noted the appearance of the central pair.

Thus, with respect to Tolhurst's record of range extension of the Splendid *Astrapia* it can only be concluded that he saw an unidentifiable *Astrapia* sp. There exists no more support for Peckover's view that the bird was more likely a hybrid, of any kind, than it was a female-plumaged *A. mayeri* (or an *A. splendidissima*). The complete lack of anything even approaching an adequate description leaves Peckover's view that the bird seen by Tolhurst was an *A. mayeri* x *A. stephaniae* hybrid "probably a three to four year old male" unjustified. I would emphasize here that whilst *A. mayeri* x *A. stephaniae* hybrids are known elsewhere they have not been confirmed in the Tari Gap area, where they may occur.

I must point out that common names are not usually acceptable for a wild hybrid individual or population. The name "Barnes' Long-tailed Bird" was originally given by Iredale (1948) to a male bird considered to represent a good new species (*Astrachia barnesi*) but which subsequently proved to be an *A. mayeri* x *A. stephaniae* hybrid. Iredale (1950) subsequently used the name "Barnes's Long-tailed Bird". Iredale's common name should then, theoretically, have appeared in **Muruk** (see editorial, vol. 6, 1993) as Barnes's *Astrapia* in order to conform with current accepted usage (Beehler et al. 1986). Clearly "Long-tailed" is less than useful as a qualification to a common name in this genus of long-tailed species. But, in any event, Iredale's supposed species is now acknowledged by all to be a wild hybrid for which a common name is inappropriate and undesirable. It would be confusing indeed to people unfamiliar with the esoteric history of bird of paradise names if authors were to persist in referring to the approximately 24 known hybrid birds of paradise (Fuller 1979) by common names given them when erroneously thought to be good species.

The use of accepted standard bird names is important, as noted by Hopkins (1986) and **Muruk** editorials, and that of many other recent ornithological journal editorials and/or correspondence. Peckover (1993) presents an illogical set of names in his brief note: Splendid *Astrapia* is the only name acceptable to **Muruk** for the species *A. splendidissima* and yet "Splendid *Astrapia* Bird of Paradise" appears in Peckover's note, where it lacks the scientific name after its first use (which is *A. splendidissima* and not *A. splendissima* as was given by Tolhurst, 1989). The acceptable name for *A. mayeri* is Ribbon-tailed *Astrapia* and not "Ribbon-tailed (sic) Bird of Paradise" of Peckover (1993) which is both contrary to and inconsistent with Peckover's use of "Splendid *Astrapia* Bird of Paradise" for *A. splendidissima*.

Many bird of paradise names used by Peckover (1990) are inconsistent with current ornithological

usage, are inconsistent within the work in question, and some appear inappropriate and undesirable at this time of relative, and long-sought, stability in New Guinea bird names. Peckover has pointed out to me (*in litt.*) that he uses the suffix Bird of Paradise as he feels the lack of it may lead people in Papua New Guinea to fail to appreciate some bird species are protected by law (as all birds of paradise are in that country). This would require, however, that the manucodes *Manucodia* spp., riflebirds *Ptiloris* spp. and (in Peckover's view) the melampittas *Melampitta* spp. also be referred to as "Birds of Paradise", but Peckover (1990) does not do so. Moreover, to be consistent, a Moluccan species presently known as the Paradise Crow *Lycocorax pyrrhopterus* would need to be known as the Paradise Crow Bird of Paradise. (*Editor's note: the nomenclature used in the journal is the responsibility of the editor at that time.*)

I hasten to acknowledge Bill Peckover's numerous valuable contributions to the ornithology, geography and other aspects of Papua New Guinea studies. I also acknowledge my own misgivings about one aspect of currently accepted common bird names. I personally disagree with and mistrust the use of the genus as part of a common name. Genera have traditionally been, and are now very much, unstable taxa and perhaps nowhere more so than in the Paradisaidae (Gilliard 1969, Diamond 1972, Beehler and Finch 1985, Coates 1990, Cracraft 1991 and numerous earlier references to be found therein).

A good New Guinean example is provided by four birds now known as Jewel-babblers *Ptilorrhoa* spp. (Coates 1990). These were long known as members of the genus *Eupetes* and three were therefore, unwisely, called Mid-mountain *Eupetes*, Lowland *Eupetes* and High Mountain *Eupetes*. When it was decided these birds were not members of the genus *Eupetes* their common names had to be changed but they are in fact now, ironically, stabilized as jewel-babbler which name can be applied no matter which genus the birds are attributed to. Thus, there are indeed grounds for a distrust and dislike of the use of the genus as part of a common name. Nevertheless I follow recently adopted usage (Frith and Frith 1992, 1993a, b and references therein) because most editors require it and to do otherwise without full discussion and justification is to invite pandemonium.

**Muruk** has become a fully-fledged, valuable and handsomely produced national ornithological journal and the editors are to be congratulated on the considerable, and often thankless, tasks involved. The observation cannot be avoided, however, that in the case of the Tolhurst and Peckover contributions discussed above it would appear that the authors and editor(s) have not availed themselves of the, usually all-too-readily-given, views and comments of fellow ornithologists prior to submission/acceptance/publication. As **Muruk** is a journal and not a newsletter (emphasized by the very fact that the Papua New Guinea Bird Society publishes both), contributions submitted to it should be peer-reviewed prior to acceptance. In the case of the above saga the apparent lack of such a review process has resulted in the doubtful nature of a 14 line note reporting an unusual species sighting (Tolhurst 1989) being pointed out within six brief lines of text in two subsequent contributions (Frith and Frith 1992, 1993a) and made into a somewhat confusing and misleading record of a supposed hybrid (Peckover 1993). It is hoped that this contribution puts all facts into objective perspective. This is: that Tolhurst's briefly sighted black-and-white tailed *Astrapia* must remain just that, an *Astrapia* sp., and no more or less can, or should have been, made of it.

Peckover's attractive book is a 1990 (not 1992) publication and in view of its cover and title page should be cited as "Papua New Guinea Birds of Paradise" and not as "Birds of Paradise".

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**MANUS - A TRIP REPORT**

by Chris Eastwood

Last October, I spent 6 days on Manus with Liz Kerr. The first and last days were spent travelling to and from the island and making various arrangements, giving us 4 full days in the field. We stayed in Lorengau and hired a 4 wheel-drive utility, which although not strictly necessary, proved useful. We had heard that some villagers from Rossun (a 15 minute drive from town) knew of the Superb Pitta (*Pitta superba*) and might be able to help us find it. At Rossun, the villagers seemed to know the bird from our description but, somewhat disconcertingly, called it a "coucou".

They suggested we return to the village the next morning when someone would help us. We duly arrived and were introduced to Adam and his younger brother Luke, who both knew the bird well. As it transpired Luke was to keep us company almost our entire stay and proved invaluable. Luke also eventually got the assistance of a cousin of his, called Morgan, who lived in a satellite village of Rossun. Luke and Morgan were tireless in their efforts to help us find birds. We paid each of our guides K20 a day.

Most of our time was spent near Rossun, although we also made a couple of trips to the waterfall (which does not appear to have an official name) and spent time exploring along the road beyond Rossun. The waterfall is reached by taking a dirt track shortly after the end of the sealed road (the main dirt road veers left and the track to the waterfall goes straight ahead; the track ends at the waterfall where there is room to park and turn the vehicle). For our last full day, we arranged (through Luke and Morgan) to make a trip out to Tong Island. Luke and Morgan borrowed a boat and a 40HP engine and we bought 12 gallons of petrol (as it turned out we were a gallon short and had to row part of the way back!). The journey took just over two hours (but would have been quite a bit longer with a smaller engine). We spent a little over an hour on the island and were shown around by one of the villagers there.

We eventually saw all the Manus endemics with the exception of the Manus Boobook (*Ninox meeki*), which we only tried for on one night (although that night we did meet a villager out looking for cuscus who had just seen an owl!). It is likely that with a little more effort we would have seen this bird. (*Editor's note*: Some taxonomists also list the Manus Masked Owl *Tyto manusi* as a distinct species. Ref. Sibley and Monroe 1990.)

I list below the species seen during our trip making comments as appropriate. Species underlined are endemic to the Admiralty Islands group.

**Brown Booby** - *Sula leucogaster*

One or two birds seen during our trip out to Tong Island.

**Rufous Night-heron** - *Nycticorax caledonicus*

**Eastern Reef-Heron** - *Egretta sacra*

A dark phase bird regularly visited the shore outside our hotel; a white phase individual was seen on one of the off-shore islands during our return from Tong.

**Brahminy Kite** - *Haliastur indus*

**Grey Goshawk** - *Accipiter novaehollandiae*