

The recent records of Little Bittern in the Middle Fly wetlands were from four habitats: reed/pit-pit, lotus beds, wild rice and floating grass mats. All four such habitats are extensive in these wetlands and collectively would offer year-round refuge except in severe drought years.

Little Bitterns have now been recorded in the Middle Fly wetlands in each of four austral seasons. Thus it is unlikely that the species occurs only as a winter migrant from Australia. Confirmation of occurrence of migrants would require marking and recapture of individuals, or systematic sampling of genetic material.

Although nests or nestlings have not been observed in the Middle Fly, Rand's specimen and the calling birds in June 1994 imply that breeding probably occurs there. Vigorous calling (the "advertising call") is done by males and is closely associated with the breeding process (pers. obs.; Hancock and Elliott 1978).

Breeding of this species occurs primarily in spring-summer in Australia. However, breeding seasons of the same species may differ between equatorial and temperate regions. In equatorial Malaysia, *Ixobrychus* species bred throughout the year (Medway and Wells 1976). Food supply for nestlings may be the main determinant of timing of breeding, and food (e. g. tadpoles: pers.

obs.) is more likely to be abundant once floodplain water-levels start to fall. In the seasonal Middle Fly wetlands, that scenario would begin in about May-June and continue for perhaps six months, which is consistent with the June and September data suggestive of breeding.

It is now apparent that the vast reed beds and other floodplain vegetation of the Middle Fly region, and possibly other parts of southern New Guinea, could indeed support the entire Australian population of Little Bittern if that population is truly migratory. However, for the present we can only conclude that there is a resident breeding population of this species in New Guinea, which may be seasonally augmented by southern migrants.

Acknowledgements Thanks are due to Ok Tedi Mining Limited, helicopter pilots, boat crews, supporting biologists and local guides for making the Middle Fly surveys possible. My participation in the surveys was supported by Asian Wetland Bureau as part of its contribution to training for wetland inventory by the Government of Papua New Guinea.

References

- Archbold R. and Rand A. L. 1940. **New Guinea Expedition**, Robert M. McBride and Co. New York.
- Coates, B. 1985. **The Birds of Papua New Guinea**. Volume 1 Dove Publications, Alderley.
- Hancock, J. and Elliott, H. 1978. **The Herons of the World**. London Editions, London.
- Jaensch, R. P. 1988. Little Bitterns breeding in northern Australia. **Australian Bird Watcher** 12: 217-21.
- Marchant, S. and Higgins, P. J. 1990. **Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds**. Volume 1, ratites to ducks. Oxford University Press, Melbourne.
- Medway, Lord and Wells, D. R. 1976. **The Birds of the Malay Peninsula**, Vol. 5. Witherby, London.
- Author's address: Asian Wetland Bureau- Oceania Program, GPO Box 636, Canberra ACT 2601, Australia.
- (Received July 1995)

NOTES ON THE BLACK MANNIKIN (*Lonchura stygia*) AND OTHER MANNIKINS (*Lonchura* spp.) AT LAKE OWA MIDDLE FLY RIVER

by Phil Gregory

During the course of a survey of the Middle Fly wetland habitats in April 1995, Roger Jaensch and I observed the rarely encountered Black Mannikin (*Lonchura stygia*) at just a single site, Lake Owa near Lake Ambuve. These are interconnected valley floor lakes joined to the Fly River via a narrow tie-channel some 192.5 river miles (ARM) from the coast. We did not find the species at either Lake Daviumbu, nor Lake Pangua despite extensive similar looking habitat. During December 1994 we failed to find it at all three of these sites, which suggests the species must be locally nomadic as grass seed abundance and water levels dictate. The Black Mannikin is endemic to the western Trans-Fly, where it is known from the Kurik and Mandum area (near the lower Digul river, Irian Jaya) east to Lake Daviumbu which was the only Papua New Guinea locality previously known (Coates 1990). Few ornithologists have had the chance to observe the species.

We initially saw the Black Mannikin in flight, two birds over the floating grass as we neared Owa village, Lake Owa. Then we saw a few individuals and groups of two in this general area, and small parties of 4 or 5 as we punted back to the main lake system. The total for the day was about 30+ birds. Most, with a maximum flock of 6, were with Grey-crowned Mannikin (*L. nevermanni*) at the floodplain end of the tie-channel. These birds exhibited a variety of plumages:

Adult: All black, with a yellowish rump and tail, the outer third of the tail with darker central feather streaks on a yellowy-orange background. The legs were blue-grey, the eye dark, and the massive bill bright blue-grey in colour. The birds resembled a melanistic Grand Mannikin *L. grandis* in shape. Some birds had a brownish tint to the colour of the upperparts.

An immature or moult plumage was highly variable:

1. Generally blackish in colour but extensively blotched with light brown and rump not yellowy, with a dark tail, dark facial area and paler nape.
2. Mainly blackish but with some pale blotches on the belly and with a pale greyish-brown nape collar.
3. A mystery Mannikin had a blackish face and whitish underparts with black blotches on the belly. Brown upperparts with black blotches on the wing coverts. This may have been a hybrid Black Mannikin x *Lonchura* sp.

Another mannikin was entirely rich tawny-orange, presumably an imm. Grey-crowned as it was always with flocks of that species and had a similar shape. Other curious *L. nevermanni* had no black throats and heads streaked with white, but with orangey rump and tails, perhaps hybrids with the White-spotted Mannikin *L. leucosticta*.

The Black Mannikins were invariably in floating or emergent grass, especially *Oryza* and *Echinochloa* spp. in full seed head, and were clearly feeding on the heads of *Echinochloa* sp. (probably *praestens*) like their congener the Grey-crowned Mannikin.

The Grey-crowned Mannikin was quite common at Lake Owa and Ambuve (max. 50 in a flock) and rather less common at the Lake Pangua (max. 10) site, as well as being occasionally seen from the boat along the river banks. We noted a distinct difference in the calls of Grey-crowned and White-spotted Mannikins, the former having a musical "tink tink" whilst the latter had a thin, plaintive "see". *L. leucosticta* was scarce, we found just a single party of 10 birds feeding on the

seeds of *Echinochloa* sp. at Lake Daviumbu and a small flock of 6 at Lake Ambuve similarly.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to OTML for their sponsorship of the waterbird survey in Dec. 94 and April 95, and to the villagers and guides of the areas surveyed for permission to visit their land. Also to Roger Jaensch for constructive comments on this note.

References

Clement, P. Harris, A. and Davis, J. (1993). **Finches and Sparrows**. Christopher Helm, London.
Coates, Brian (1990) **The Birds of Papua New Guinea** Vol. 2 Dove Publications, Alderley.

Author's address: PO Box 69, Tabubil 332, Western Province, Papua New Guinea.
(Received July 1995)

OBSERVATIONS ON THE FLY RIVER GRASSBIRD (*Megalurus albolimbatus*)

by Phil Gregory and Roger Jaensch

The Fly River Grassbird is a little known restricted range species endemic to the Papua New Guinea Trans-Fly region where it was previously known from the Bensbach area and the middle Fly including Lake Daviumbu (Coates 1990). Few ornithologists have had the chance to observe it due to the remote range and the inaccessible nature of its habitat.

During the course of the waterbird survey of the middle Fly sponsored by OTML for the Asian Wetland Bureau, Roger Jaensch and I found the species at some 3 sites. Being decidedly cryptic and similar to Tawny Grassbird (*M. timoriensis*) identification is not easy, but we found the following characters helpful:

Unstreaked bright tawny-orange crown, with a white supercilium and whitish underparts. The bird appears somewhat smaller and cleaner than a Tawny Grassbird, with an orangey rump, and the tail rather gently rounded and not long and raggedy like a Tawny Grassbird. The tertials were black prominently edged white, a very good field character.

Caution! The female of the local race of White-shouldered Fairy-wren (*Mahurus alboscapulatus*) inhabits similar habitat and has a whitish supercilium and white underparts. This has initially fooled several very skilled ornithologists.....

A frequently heard call was a monotonous, quiet rising whistled "zeeee", which appeared to be characteristic. PG has heard this call from birds at Wando near Bensbach and we also heard it at Lake Ambuve.

The habitat was *Echinochloa* and *Leersia* sp. at Deep Creek lagoon, Lake Pangua, in the midst of a flooded plain, accessible only by boat at this time of year. Besides these two sites, we heard the Fly River Grassbird calling from floating *Echinochloa* grass beds near the entrance to Lake Daviumbu. The habitat at Bensbach seems to be much more tied to patches of sedge *Cyperus* sp. which is largely absent at these middle Fly localities.

Author's address: PO Box 69, Tabubil 332, Western Province, Papua New Guinea.
(Received July 1995)

MYSTERIES, AND ADDITIONS TO THE BIRDS OF AMBUE AND TARI DISTRICTS, SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS PROVINCE

By Joseph Tano

(Joseph is the naturalist at Ambue Lodge, he knows the birds of the area very well and is particularly helpful with calls. Birding visitors should arrange to contact him prior to arrival as he is quite busy. Editor)

Lesser Frigatebird *Fregata ariel*

One landed in a *Nothofagus* tree at the Tari Gap, not previously recorded.

[Red-rumped Swallow *Hirundo daurica*]

Reported by Joseph as nest building (a mud cup) near the Dauli Teacher's College about a metre away from a hydro intake. The species is a northern winter migrant to Papua New Guinea in greatly increased numbers in recent years, but there has never been any suggestion of nesting and I quote the report above just in case (Editor).

Northern Fantail *Rhipidura rufiventris*

Not found in the area, but recorded in the Tari valley about a km. from the airport on 25 /1/ 95. Joseph also reports a mysterious species as follows: First recorded on 16 August 1992, a species Joseph has never seen before. A daily visitor to the trees and bamboo in front of the big waterfall, keeping company with a male Sclater's Whistler (*Pachycephala soror*). A robin-shaped bird usually keeping in cover but at times comes and perches right in the open. Wholly black with red breast, and white in the tail; flicks its tail when perched and spends much time on the *Homolanthus* tree branch and clinging to the side of the tree. The site is continually misty and cloudy.

Any visitors with the time to check out this report could be in for a surprise! Please let us know what it is, Joseph reckons it is most like the Snow Mountain Robin (*Petroica archboldi*).....

Author's address: C/o Ambue Lodge, Trans-Niugini Tours, PO Box 371, Mt. Hagen
(Received August 1994)

NESTING OBSERVATION OF GREY CROW (*Corvus tristis*) AT VARIRATA NATIONAL PARK NOVEMBER 1994

By William F. Glynn

Site Location

Varirata National Park is located thirty five kilometres east of Port Moresby at the south west corner of the Sogeri plateau. It is bounded on the south and west by escarpments. Elevation at Varirata lookout, which is above the western escarpment, is 833 metres.

Location of Nest

The nest was located approximately thirty metres below and sixty metres west of the lookout in rain forest in a pinkish-orange smooth barked deciduous tree estimated to be twenty five metres high. At the time the tree did not have any leaves. The nest was constructed about twenty metres above the ground close to the end of a horizontal branch. The nest which appeared to be above the canopy was sheltered from the south east trade winds, which occur from June to December, by the escarpment.