

NOTES ON THE GREATER MELAMPITTA (*Melampitta gigantea*) IN THE TABUBIL AREA

By Phil Gregory

The Greater Melampitta was discovered in the Tabubil area in October 1992 on Mount Robinson, by Richard Rowland and the author, following up a distinctive loud call that the author had noted since 1991. Since then further work has revealed this seemingly rare and cryptic species is quite widespread from 750m up to about 1,100m, now being known from some 4 sites in the general area. Otherwise it is so far only known from Mount Mura in far south east Papua and Mt. Somoro in the Torricelli Mountains of the north coast of Papua New Guinea (Coates 1990), and at a handful of sites in Irian Jaya. It is however likely to be much under-recorded and is probably to be expected wherever forested limestone karst country occurs in the 650-1400m height band.

In the Tabubil area it occurs along the Ok Ma road at two sites at 750m, and at Dablin Creek at 800m, whilst several territories are known from the original Mount Robinson vicinity around 1100m. The latter site is anomalous in not being obviously limestone karst country like all the other localities in the Tabubil area, being instead on steep slopes in primary hill forest where fallen trees and root tangles may offer similar habitat requirements.

The species is very shy but inquisitive, its presence being revealed by its loud calls. The birds seem to come and check out intruders, so sitting quietly watching the understorey for movement is a good way to see the bird. They tend to come in quite suddenly and circle round, hopping or half flying and running, whilst their black colouration makes them very difficult to pick up amongst the shadows of the forest floor. They occasionally fly down-slope, and are extremely wary, resembling a giant black terrestrial pitohui more than anything else, and certainly looking and sounding nothing like Lesser Melampitta (*M. lugubris*). The unusually heavy black bill has a distinctly hooked tip, and often looks pale in flight.

The Ok Ma birds are closely associated with limestone sink-holes, and seem to be centred on a depression measuring a couple of hundred metres across, with many small sink-holes scattered across it. Interestingly enough this area was cleared not long ago and the birds seem to use the dense regrowth quite readily, as well as coming into the adjoining forest where they follow ridge lines and use fallen logs as perches.

Calling is sporadic, which is one reason why the species may be much under-recorded. Locally October to March seem to be the main months for vocalizations, though this year I have also now heard them in July, August and September. Like so many New Guinea birds the calls are much the best way of locating the species, the chances of finding it if not calling are minimal. Early morning does not seem to be much favoured for calling, they seem to commence from about 0800 onwards, and again from mid to late afternoon depending on weather conditions. The vocalizations fall into 3 main groups:

1. A very quiet almost inaudible "sip", heard only if really close.
2. A loud, ringing somewhat interrogative whistled "m ee", the first syllable rising and the second slightly descending, constantly repeated and audible over 100m away, and very loud if close. This seems to be the common contact call and is used when the bird is curious. This note is sometimes given by several birds, almost as if they are delineating their territories by replying to each other. It is quite diagnostic and not like any other New Guinea bird of my experience.
3. An incisive run together "m-ee" series, constantly repeated and rather harsher than the previous call. Perhaps more of an alarm note?

Tape recordings have been made and lodged with the British Library of Wildlife Sounds in London. Dr. Jared Diamond (*in litt.*) informs me that the tape corresponds well with the calls of the species in Irian Jaya.

References

- Diamond, J. M. 1982. *Melampitta gigantea*: possible relation between feather structure and underground roosting habits. **Condor** 85: 89-91.
- Richards, A and Rowland, R. 1995. List of Birds Recorded in Papua New Guinea during the period 16 October to 29 November 1992. **Muruk** 7(2): 75-95
- Author's address: P.O. Box 69, Tabubil 332, Western Province, PNG. (Received October 96)

MORE NEW RECORDS FROM AMBUEA, AND A FURTHER SIGHTINGS OF A MYSTERY BIRD

By Joseph Tano

On 3rd March 1996 I again saw a mystery bird that I had first seen on 16th August 1992 (Tano 1995), which closely resembles the Snow Mountain Robin (*Petroica archboldi*). The bird was seen again near the waterfall by a rocky stream bed, whilst I was watching a Mountain Mouse Warbler (*Cateroscelis robusta*). The robin was just above my head and watched for about 20 minutes before flying away downstream, and is an all black bird with a red breast and a little bit of white in the tail. (Editor's note: Joseph is resident naturalist at the Lodge and knows the local birds well. He has reported this robin before and it would be well worth checking out. *P. archboldi* is currently known only from the high boulder slopes in the Snow Mountains of Irian Jaya, and has been seen by very few if any birders in recent times.)

I have also recorded the following species as additions to the birds of the Ambuea or Tari area.

Little Pied Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax melanoleucos*) Dauli Teacher's College.

Bare-eyed Rail (*Eulabeornis plumbeiventris*) Lodge grounds (Previously known from a bird that flew into the lodge buildings one night...Ed.)

Long-billed Honeyeater (*Melilestes megarhynchus*) near Tari airport.

Black-winged Monarch (*Monarcha melanopsis*) near Tari airport.

Boyer's Cuckoo-shrike (*Coracina boyeri*) Dauli Teacher's College.

A further interesting sighting concerns Mountain Nightjar (*Eurostopodus archboldi*), which was found with a juvenile at a bare ground nest site near the Bailey Bridge at 2200m on 28th October 1995. The adult bird initially flew off, but came back a number of times and eventually perched nearby on a tree branch. The juvenile was white with black spottings. (A nest was also found near here in October 1992, reference Rowland 92...Ed.) On March 16th 1995 I was at the Tari Gap and found 3 Mountain Nightjar sleeping together on a low Pandanus branch about a metre from the ground. One bird flew away, but the other two remained.

References

- Tano, J. 1995. Mysteries, and Additions to the Birds of the Ambuea and Tari Districts, Southern Highlands Province. **Muruk** 7 (3): 121
- Rowland, R. 1992. Mountain Nightjar (*Eurostopodus archboldi*) Breeding at Ambuea. **Muruk** 6 (3): 11.
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