

**THE NEW GUINEA FLIGHTLESS RAIL (*Megacrex inepta*) IN GULF PROVINCE***By Phil Gregory*

The New Guinea Flightless Rail *Megacrex inepta* is known from the Fly River and Sepik basins in Papua New Guinea, but remains one of the least known New Guinea species, with hardly any Europeans having seen it in recent years. The very name *Megacrex inepta* conjures up visions of a large and clumsy crane blundering through the forest and swamps. Chris Eastwood and I searched for the legendary beast around Kiunga in Western Province in 1993 using a local guide, as the bird is apparently widespread in the swamp forest and comes into places where sago is being prepared. We saw the footprints of a large rail type bird in a hollowed out sago log, but no more. In 1994 a one-legged captive bird appeared in Kiunga and I saw it in August, but sightings of a wild bird were still needed.

Early in 1995 a team from WWF were engaged in a biodiversity survey of an area near Kikori in Gulf Province, and were lucky enough to be told of a place where sago was being made and rails were visiting. A hunters blind had been built for the purpose of spearing anything that came in, rails included, and Ian Burrows amongst others got to see and photograph the rails at point blank range.

Chris and I made a special trip to the area in July 95, going with the local landowner Garry Bissue who is keen to start a visitor's lodge on Veiru creek near Kikori, in an area of rich lowland forest. He had chopped sago palm specially for us, and had built an extraordinary blind from palm fronds, which looked like a bizarre giant green spiky beehive in the forest clearing, and which proved to be totally waterproof. This was just as well as it was the wet season there and we experienced heavy rain daily. Our first visit saw four of us sat in the hide in near total darkness, peering through small holes to the clearing, which remained free of rails despite a four hour vigil.

However the rain had delayed our start that morning, so we returned in mid afternoon. This time it was only an hour before I saw a movement at the rear of the clearing, and picked out two Flightless Rails flicking their wings as they walked along. Chris and I waited anxiously and had several brief views as the birds came slowly closer, eventually coming right by the blind and hopping up onto the sago log, walking down it directly opposite us! An adult and an immature bird came first, with wings spread and held up over the back, flicked with each step they took. Here was one of the great New Guinea mystery birds walking towards us and then feeding in the sago slurry beneath the blind, soon to be joined by another adult and well grown immature bird.

These immatures (originally 3 of them) were small on June 10th according to Garry, but were now nearly full-grown and with plumage much as the adult, just less of a rusty wash on the sides of the chest. The bill was slightly shorter also, being yellow with a black central portion whereas the culmen of the adult birds was dark with a yellow tip and yellow lower mandible. The body shape was strangely tail-less with rather long grey legs, and the birds walked with heads lowered. The large dark eye and dark eye stripe gave an almost night heron-like look to the head. Chris saw an adult give a white grub to an immature, which kept up a high-pitched cheeping like a baby chicken. The adults had a quiet deep toned note, almost braying and sometimes quite drawn out. They fed around the area for about 10 minutes then walked off into the forest.

The species is quite widespread in the area and is best seen at sago sites, where some hunting goes on, birds being killed by arrows and remaining even when one has been slain as long as no noise is made by the hunter. The area also holds Southern Crowned Pigeon (*Goura scheepmekeeri*) and Southern Cassowary (*Casuaris casuaris*), both of which were calling near our blind. A persistent loud crack like a pistol shot was apparently a cassowary running at a tree to knock down fruits! Vulturine Parrot (*Psittichas fulgidus*), Palm Cockatoo (*Probosciger aterrimus*), Twelve-wired (*Seleucidis melanoleuca*) and King Birds of Paradise (*Cicinnurus regius*) are quite easy to see from the river and the full range of lowland Papua New Guinea species may be found, including New Guinea Harpy-Eagle (*Harpyopsis novaeguineae*).

Garry Bissue has a small lodge made from traditional materials in an attractive clearing on the banks of Veiru Creek, where you can stay for K30 a day full board. Travel is by plane from Port Moresby to Kikori (2 hours), then by boat from Kikori, about 30 minutes ride away. He hopes to have the area made a wildlife management zone with eco-tourism providing a source of income. Loggers are however already at the gates, and it can only be hoped that the WWF sponsored business initiatives based around sustainable resource use succeed in preventing major devastation. Pay him a visit and ask him to prepare a Flightless Rail blind for you!

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