

The Mystery New Britain Rail: a Bronze Ground-Dove (*Gallicolumba beccarii*)

By Guy Dutson and Tony Palliser

This short note serves to resolve the earlier note on an unidentified rail in New Britain (Palliser 1992) and to alert other observers to the characters and subspecific variation of the Bronze Ground-Dove *Gallicolumba beccarii*.

Bronze Ground-Dove is a rather uncommon and secretive New Guinea species, with subspecies ranging across the Bismarck and Solomon islands. Although usually seen when flushed or flying across a path, a stationary observer can occasionally obtain very close views of foraging birds. GD saw several Bronze Ground-Doves walking on the forest floor on New Britain and was struck by the unfamiliar jizz and broad white eye-ring. Foraging birds appear very compact, and round (cf photographs in Coates 1985) often with a cocked tail. The long legs and rather fast, erratic progression do create a rail-like impression, as indicated in the generic name *Gallicolumba*. The Bismarck and Solomons subspecies all have a white eye-ring, which appears to be particularly broad in New Britain birds. This is shown well in in-hand photographs in Clay (1994) and a narrow white eye-ring is illustrated in del Hoyo *et al* (1998). Based on these recent observations, we suggest that the 'rail' reported by Palliser (1992) was a Bronze Ground-Dove.

The previously unreported call is a long series of 'ho-ho-ho..' notes, varying only slightly in volume and frequency over several minutes. This call is quieter than most other pigeon calls and is easily overlooked amongst the usual mixture of fruit-dove and other forest calls. Calling birds were usually perched one or two metres above the ground, often hidden and difficult to see before they flushed away. They occasionally flew towards playback of the call, but more often, changed perch, remaining unobserved. Based on calls and observations, Bronze Ground-Doves are locally common but usually scarce across their island range. This updates Diamond (1987) who traced no recent records from the Solomon Islands, and Buckingham *et al.* (1995) who observed birds on Manus, Rennell and Makira. White-bibbed Ground-Dove *G. jobiensis* has a similar but louder call on New Britain and appears to be more responsive to playback (GD pers. obs; P. Gregory pers. obs.).

References

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Notes on the New Ireland Boobook (*Ninox variegata*)

By Phil Gregory

During a trip to New Ireland in June 2000 we found this poorly known species in hill forest along the road to Limbin, on the Lelet Plateau. This is now a regular site for it, from the coast up to the plateau. The birds are typical of many *Ninox* in that they duet, with the male call presumably being the deeper toned one as is usual with the genus. A male seen at about 900m altitude adopted a curious horizontal crouching posture along the branch, with the wings slightly drooped on either side of the limb and showing prominent black barring on the very dark grey primaries. The head appeared greyish with a paler forehead; the underparts were well spotted with dark and the chest washed rufous with a paler throat. The eyes were yellow and the legs and feet orange. Each time he called he would pump the wings downwards, the call being a deep gruff grunting disyllabic rapidly repeated "prrrt-prrrt prrrt-prrrt" series, the disyllabic calls repeated three or four times.

There are very few records of the species, which may not be uncommon wherever hill forest survives on New Ireland. In the older literature it is also erroneously recorded from New Britain as well, and given the inappropriate name of Bismarck Boobook, when it is actually a New Ireland endemic. We suggest the vernacular name should reflect this status. We also suggest the use of the appropriate local vernacular name boobook (onomatopoeic, derived from the call) for the small and medium sized *Ninox* owls, rather than the confusing American coining Hawk-Owl. There are two other not closely related genera (Northern Hawk Owl *Surnia ulula* and Papuan Hawk-Owl *Uroglaux dimorpha*) which are better known by this name.

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