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NEW AND NOTEWORTHY BIRD RECORDS FROM THE ISLAND OF SERAM, MALUKU

by
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Summary

A number of interesting bird records were made by a team of ten biologists from Cambridge University (UK), Universitas Pattimura (Ambon, Maluku), and Wetlands International, (Indonesia), during a three month research and conservation project in 1996 in the proposed *Cagar Alam* (Nature Reserve) of Wae Bula in north east Seram. This paper documents five species previously unrecorded on the island and provides information concerning several species of interest in terms of distribution or conservation. Seram still holds large tracts of unexplored and unsurveyed forest which are likely to hold important populations of threatened and endemic species; future visitors are encouraged to extend our limited knowledge of the avifauna of this island.

Introduction

Seram has been little studied by biologists. The island was formed in the early Pliocene and has apparently never been connected to another land mass (Audley Charles 1993); such isolation has probably been significant in the development of endemism on the island. The second largest island in Maluku, Seram holds a total of 30 bird species of restricted range (<50,000 km^2), 12 of which are endemic. This includes the endemic genus *Tephrozosterops,* one of only two genera endemic to south Maluku (White and Bruce 1986). Bowler and Taylor (1989) conducted ornithological surveys in and around Manusela National Park, adding 23 species to the avifaunal list for the island. This recent project to the Wae Bula area of north east Seram constitutes the first major biological surveys outside the National Park.

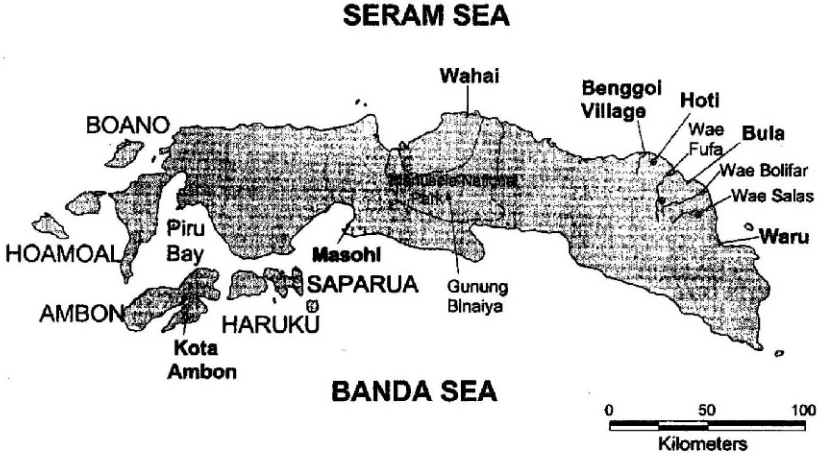
Information presented here is further discussed by Isherwood *et at.* (1997), the project report (obtainable from the Natural History Book Service, Totnes, Devon).

Sites and logistics

Access to the Wae Bula area can be made in several ways. Santos Petroleum Ltd operate a company plane between Ambon and Bula on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. The one way flight costs Rp. $165 (July 1996). By boat, the Taman Pelita, the Wahai Star and the Bum Star all run to Bula round. the western end of Seram. This method is cheaper but slow, costing $12 but taking about 72 hours. Alternatively there are buses from Ambon town (via a ferry to Seram) which go to Saka on the north coast of Seram for $8. Taxi speedboats are available from Saka to Wahai, from where speedboats can be chartered to Bula for $140 per craft.

In September 1996 the road between Wahai and Bula was not yet completed, but this may be passable now, which would provide road transport as another alternative from Wahai. Sites are located on the accompanying map. Fieldwork was carried out in two secondary lowland forest sites (c. 15 20 years old) near to the coast, adjacent to the settlements of Bula and Hoti.

Wae Salas: Forest was surveyed over a period of four days (30 August 2 September 1996) on the western bank of Wae Salas (River Salas) near Bula, from a basecamp at 3°12'56.0"S; 130°32'51.9"E. The forest in this area had been selectively logged.


SERAM SEA
Wahai
Benggoi Village
Hoti
Wae Fufa
Bula
Wae Bolifar
Wae Salas
Waru
BOANO
Manusela National Park
Piru Bay
HOAMOAL
Masohi
SAPARUA
Gunung Binaiya
AMBON
HARUKU
Kota Ambon
BANDA SEA
0 50 100
Kilometers

Hoti: Eleven days (23 July 2 August 1996) were spent near Hoti village, in secondary forest flanking the road (then in construction) between Bula and Wahai, from a basecamp at 31°1'11.6"S; 130°20'36.1"E. The forest had hem selectively logged ten to twenty yew previously, and although some taller trees remained (20 30 m high), the average canopy height was around 15 m. There was a large area of *Imperata* grassland adjacent to the road near the base camp. The terrain was entirely flat, with numerous small streams and a larger river (Wae Kapailo), and several stagnant pools adjacent to the road whew earth had been removed for construction purposes.

War Fufa: Nineteen days (9 August 26 August 1996) were spent at a primary forest site in the headwaters of the Fufa river. Surveys at M site covered both lowland and 1ower montane forest (150 1027 m), with a base camp at 3°13'42.1"S; 130°2129.4"E. From Bula access to the montane site 1.5 days: a truck from Bula west to Sesar on the coast, and then inland until the road weds the bank of the Fufa river. From here the site can be reached by walking up the braided river into the primary forest which exists inland. Most of the study site was primary forest, disturbed in places; by landslides and floods. The canopy was approximately 30.40 m, with emergents to 45 m. The sate was a steep sided valley, with the base camp at the confluence of the Wae Fufa and a major tributary.

Opportunistic observations were made in Bula and at other sites on the north coast, as well as during all journeys around the island.

Birds records

The following records are included by virtue of their distributional or conservation significance Nomenclature and taxonomy follows Coates & Bishop (1997).

Southern Cassowary *Casuarius casuarius*

There were one sight and six aural records of this species from primary forest at Wae Fufa. At Hoti there were five sightings of either single birds or two birds together, and one individual was beard crashing through *Imperata* grassland on the forest edge; at Wae Salas two individuals were beard during the short survey. Calls were deep resonant hoots, given intermittently. Small mounds of pale fruit pips clumped together were regularly found on the form floor and were believed to be the droppings of this species. Cassowaries were not recorded in the wild by Bowler and Taylor (1989) in Manusela NP, and Taylor (1992) observed no cassowaries in logged or degraded forest. Our observations in secondary forest are therefore interesting. Bechler et al (1985) claim *C. casuarius* to be a species of primary forest in Papua New Guinea, however this may be because the species is so heavily hunted there. Local people in villages along the coast were very familiar with the species and claimed to trap them for food.

Great billed Heron *Ardea sumatrana*

One individual was seen taking off from a sandbank in mangrove near the month of the Bolifar river, and flying heavily away upstream. This is the first record of this species from the main island of Seram, previous records coming from small offshore islands (Bowler and Taylor 1989; Taylor 1992).

Pied Heron *Egretra picata*

One was seen m damp fields at the Cakrawala logging camp east of Bula on 29 August. There is only one previous of this species from Seram (Taylor 1992).

[Brown Goshawk *Accipiter fasciatus]*
One putative individual was seen in degraded lowland forest at Hoti on 22 July. The bird was perched on a midstorey branch, from which it made a short flight and then returned. It was distinguished from the more common Variable Goshawk A. *novaehollandiae* by its rufous neck collar (lacking in the Seram subspecies of *A. novaehollanediae),* and distinct brown barring below. If confirmed, this would appear to be the first record of this species on Seram.

Rufous necked Sparrowhawk *Accipiter erythrauchen ceramensis*
Two records were made in primary forest, one at c. 150 in at I 100h beside Wae Fufa and one at c. 950 m, at 0930h.

Gurney's Eagle *Aquila gurneyi*
A total of *13* records was made in primary forest at Wae Fufa, probably referring to three individuals: two adults and a juvenile. These repeated sightings indicate that the species is resident on Seram as suggested by K.D. Bishop (*in litt.* to D. Holmes, Jan 1999), who reports observations *of* this species on all his visits the island.

Wandering Whistling duck *Dendrocygna arcuata*
This species was fairly common in pools beside the road at Hoti, where they were seen in company with Spotted Whistling Duck *D. guttata.* A maximum group size of nine was counted on 27 July. This is the first record *of* this species for Seram.

Far Eastern Curlew *Numenius madagascariensis*
Far Eastern Curlew was fairly common along the coast with six observed in Bula harbour on 6 August and c. 20 on 3 September. Five individuals were also present at the mouth of the Bolifar river on 28 August.

Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*
This species was uncommon on the coast, with five present in Bula harbour on 6 August and 6 September, and three observed in the lower reaches of the Pufa river on 29 August.

Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola*
One adult, moulting into winter plumage, was observed in Bula harbour between 4 and 6 September Bowler and Taylor (1989) made the first records for this species on Seram.

Great Knot *Calidris renuirostris*
Two or three individuals were observed on mudflats in Bula harbour between 29 August and 6 September. This species has been recorded by Bowler and Taylor (1989) in small numbers.

Lang toed Stint *Calidris subminuta*
Six individuals were observed in Bula harbour on 6 August; they were not seen again, suggesting rapid movement during passage.

Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea*
Two adults moulting into winter plumage were present in Bula Harbour between 3 and 6 September. This is the second record for Sam (Bowler and Taylor. 1989).

Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybridus*
Ten Whiskered Terns were observed from the boat between Wahai and Bula on 16 July. A single individual was observed at Silohan on 18 July.

Caspian Tern *Hydroprogne caspia*
One individual was seen flying over the sea between Seram and Ambon on 8 July. This species is known from Wallacea from only two observations, both from Timor (White and Bruce 1986; Coates and Bishop 1997). This is the first sighting of this species from Maluku, and therefore its northernmost locality in Wallacea.

Sooty Tern *Sterna fuscata*
A group of four was observed from a boat between Masohi and Ambon on 7 September. This is the second record for Seram (Bowler and Taylor, 1989).

Purple naped Lory *Lorius domicella*
This species was recorded only in primary forest at Wae Fufa, mainly over 700 m altitude. A total of 34 visual and 56 aural records was made, with groups of four to five individuals seen regularly. A minimum of (roughly) 10 14 individuals was estimated to live along Ikmof the highest ridge in eastern Seram, based on observations of groups and records of calling birds from different points along the ridge. The species was observed on several occasions flying in the company of Moluccan Red Lory *Eos bornea,* and foraging in the canopy of fruiting fig trees with raucous mixed flocks of *E. bornea* and Rainbow Lorikeet *Trichoglossus haematodus.* On one occasion an indivdual was observed chewing at the bark of a dead tree. Birds were seen most often in the sub canopy or canopy, and calls were usually made from exposed perches or in flight. On one. occasion a pair was observed allo preening at 1100h on the branch of an exposed dead tree in a clearing at 700 m. Purple naped Lory is highly vocal and makes a number of different calls including a very distinctive musical whistling call: 'weee ooh, weee auuh' (the first phrase descending in pitch, the second rising), a harsh braying call reminiscent of Salmon crested Cockatoo *Cacatua molurrensis,* and a wide variety of whines and whistles, some virtually indistinguishable from Moluccan Starling *Aplonis mysolensis.* Recordings of the call are deposited with the Wildlife Section of the National Sound Archive at the British Library in London. This appears to be the largest known population of this species.

Salmon crested Cockatoo *Cacatua moluccensis*
A total of 203 sight records and 316 aural records was made at Wae Fufa, referring to an estimated 40 60 individuals resident in the primary lowland forest of the Fufa valley. It should be noted that this is a very rough estimate based on observations of groups and records of calling birds, and scaled up to account for the area of suitable habitat in the valley. The maximum recorded group size at Wae Fufa was five. In secondary forest at Hoti, 95 visual and 42 aural records referred to a minimum of four and a maximum of eight individuals. Cockatoos were commonly observed feeding on forest fruits and were also observed removing bark and dead foliage apparently in search of invertebrates. Previous fieldworkers (Bowler and Taylor 1989; Taylor 1992; Marsden 1995) have found this species to be very scarce in Manusela National Park, almost certainly due to more intensive trapping in this relatively accessible area. Eastern Seram may be a stronghold for this species and further work in unsurveyed and remote regions is required. The Merkele ridge running east of Manusela National Park, and the area to the west of the Trans Seram Highway, are priority areas for such surveys, for both this species and for Purple naped Lory.

Great billed Parrot *Tanygnathus megalorhynchos*
Observations of this species are noteworthy because it was found to be abundant at both lowland sites and in cultivated areas near to villages, but uncormnon in the primary forest of Wae Fufa. Bowler and Taylor (1989) and Taylor (1992) note the species as more common in primary forest, and possibly in need of protection. No trade in this species was observed or discovered in north east Seram, and only one individual was observed in the Ambon bird market during three visits.

Little Kingfisher *Alcedo pusilla*
Little Kingfisher was seen twice, in degraded forest at Hoti and in mangroves at the mouth of the Kapailo River (Wae Kapailo). These are the first records of the species for Seram. However, it is known from Halmahera through to Kai, so its occurrence on Serarn is not surprising.

Moluccan Thrush *Zoothera dumasi*
There were seven observations of single *Zoothera sp.* thrushes flushed from the forest floor between 800 and 1,000 m in the Wae Fufa watershed. Two individuals had white on the alula and wing coverts, and another appeared pale on the lower chest. Birds in flight gave a high pitched 'tsree tsree' call. All views were unfortunately very brief; however there is no possible confusion with the only other thrush known on Seram, Island Thrush *Turdus poliocephalus.* These sightings constitute the third record of this species on Seram. Bowler and Taylor (1989) made one observation of three individuals in Manusela, NP, the first since it was collected in 1921.

Island Whistler *Pachycephalus phaionotus*
Three individuals were seen in an area of dead mangroves near Bula on 28 August, and a nesting pair was observed at the mouth of the Bolifar River on 3 September. The nest, a small woven cup, was built low down (c. 2 in) in a Casuarina tree behind the beach. These are the first records of this species on Seram, and the first on such a large island. The species is known as a small island specialist, being found on small Moluccan and West Papuan islands, although it has recently been seen on Burn (M. Poulsen, pers. comm.). The relatively obvious presence of this species on the coast makes it difficult to understand why it was not collected last century; the possibility exists that it has only recently colonised these larger islands. However, it seems more likely that it has merely been overlooked.

Grey collared Oriole *Oriolus forsteni*
Only three definite sightings of this species were made, all in the Wae Fufa. watershed, due to the difficulties of separating it from Serarn Friarbird *Philenion subcorniculants;* there has been only one previous published sighting in the field (see Taylor 1992). Aural identification of this species has been confused in the past (see Taylor 1992), hence its status on Seram remains enigmatic. Field identification to separate this species from Philemon *subcorniculatus* is a problem, Examination of specimens at BMNH (Tring) suggest the shorter, less decurved and more oriole like beak of *Oriolus forsteni* is the most reliable identification feature; *forsteni* also has a greener, more distinctly streaked crown, but the value of this feature in field identification is unknown.

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