

Birdwatching trip report - Indonesia

Period: 2.4.2008-29.4.2008

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Key sites visited: Equatorial East Indonesia

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Jens & Kathy Munthe

URGENT EDIT - Left Indonesia April 29, stopped taking Mefloquine May 21, Jens' acute *P. vivax* malaria began two months after leaving Indonesia on June 29, attempt to kill dormant *P. vivax* in liver with Primaquine began July 11.

SUMMARY

We did a Papua Bird Club 28-day birding tour 2-29 April 2008. We birded equatorial Wallacea and western New Guinea, visiting Tangkoko, Dumoga Bone, Mt. Ambang and Lore Lindu on Sulawesi; Kali Batu Putih on Halmahera; Batanta, Salawati and Senapang Islands off the western tip of New Guinea; and Arfak Mountain near Manokwari. All sites are within 1½° of the Equator. Wallacean islands have small avifaunas compared to Asia or New Guinea, but a much higher degree of endemism, which accounts for our skewed birding results of 208 life-birds and 4 life families among only 278 trip-birds. Our nominees as birds-to-die-for in this itinerary are Wilson's, Red, King, Superb and Magnificent Birds-of-Paradise, Black Sicklebill, Standardwing, Satanic Nightjar, and representatives of hard-to-get families such as Moustached Treeswift, Black Berrypecker, Tit Berrypecker and especially Feline Owlet-Nightjar.

MANADO to TANGKOKO, 2-5 April

Kathy and I arrived at Manado mid-day 2 April on SilkAir from Singapore. Silk's Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday roundtrips are currently the *only* way in to equatorial Indonesia between Wallace's Line and the Papua New Guinea border for most nationalities. The 30-day Visa-on-Arrival took five minutes and cost \$25. Maria Prativi and Untu (a nickname meaning Lucky) of Papua Bird Club collected us after baggage-claim. From this point until we paid the departure tax at this airport on 30 April they paid for *everything*, even including all tips and, for all we know, bribes, from the small amount we had wire-transferred a month earlier. One or both of them kept us within sight for the next 28 days.

We were whisked to a fine seafood lunch before starting the two-hour drive to Tangkoko National Park. But we stopped five minutes into the journey, pulled our binoculars and scope from our luggage, and collected Grey-rumped Treeswift (life family), Scaly-breasted Munia, Slender-billed Crow, White-vented Myna, Lesser Coucal, Large Sulawesi Hanging-Parrot and other birds. This put us a bit behind schedule, so we stopped only briefly after dark to note Sulawesi Nightjar and the first of Untu's *many* stake-outs: Sulawesi Scops Owl. We stayed at Mama Roos, said to be best of the three homestays near the main trail into the National Park. The bathroom with sink, shower and flush toilet was nice, and the restaurant was adequate. We didn't use the mosquito nets, partly because I become entangled in them and partly because there were few mosquitos in the room. The annoying insects at Tangkoko are the chiggers, but they are ineffective compared to the American Gulf Coast variety.

The month's pattern of up at 4:30 and birding by 5:30 was quickly established. Afternoon birding was washed out the first day, but our 22 morning life-birds featured Green and Silver-tipped Imperial Pigeons, Black-naped Fruit Dove, Red-backed Thrush, Ruddy and Green-backed Kingfishers, Bay Coucal, Yellow-billed Malkoha, Sulawesi Hawk-Eagle and Knobbed Hornbill. This bias toward large non-passerines is typical of Wallacea; it provides easy, spectacular birding.

Five hours of birding the next morning yielded the day's targets, Lilac-cheeked and Sulawesi Dwarf Kingfisher. The afternoon outrigger-boat trip was the easy, and perhaps only, way to see Sulawesi Masked Owl, but high tide prevented us from seeing Great-billed Kingfisher in the mangroves. At sunset we landed on a beach below the current Spectral Tarsier tree. We watched this darling smallest of the Primates until dark and the onset of a torrential downpour, through which we slogged back to Mama Roos.

We scoped seven life-birds while driving over the mountains on the way back to Manado the next morning, the most impressive being Black-billed Koel, Sulawesi Dwarf Hornbill and White-bellied Imperial Pigeon.

DUMOGA BONE & MT.AMBANG, 5-8 April

Proceeding westward through villages sporting many huge red crosses wishing us "Selamat Paskah" (Happy Easter), we scanned rice paddies for such marsh birds as Javan Pond Heron and White-browed Crane. Five hours from Manado we reached our homestay at the edge of Dumoga Bone N. P., then went in to the Park for Spotted Whistling Duck, Sunda Teal and Cinnamon Bittern, but the river was too deep to cross in the dark for owls.

Next morning's target was the endemic Maleo. The strange zoo-like refuge of this rare scrubfowl also contained Brown Cuckoo Dove, Blue-backed Parrot and Red-backed Buttonquail. Next we drove up to Singsingon on the plateau below Mt. Ambang, where our homestay was literally the home of Park Ranger and local guide Julius. The superb garden and pink-tile veranda did not prepare us for the unlighted bathroom with only wooden foot-plates astride a hole and water-box-with-scoop.

We saw 18 life-birds in eight hours of birding at this high altitude of 1,500 meters. Primary targets were owls: the recently split Cinnabar Hawk Owl, which we heard, and the rare Minahassa Masked Owl, which Untu called in for a good look. Other highlights were Isabelline Bush-Hen, Spotted Harrier, Red-eared and Superb Fruit Doves, Sulawesi Pygmy Woodpecker and Black Eagle. We picked up other interesting birds during our morning drive back to the Manado airport on 8 April.

LORE LINDU, 9-12 April

It took 24 hours to reach Lore Lindu N. P. via air to Makassar, another flight to Palu, a short night at Palu's Rama Garden Hotel, morning formalities at Park Headquarters, and the drive southward through birder-unfriendly villages. Road-birding in the mountains north of our base at the Sedyi Inn produced life-birds Asian Glossy Starling, Purple-winged Roller, Spotted Kestrel, Piping Crow, Ivory-backed Wood-Swallow, Caerulean Cuckoo-Shrike, Yellow-bellied White-Eye and Crimson Sunbird among many familiar species.

Our first full day at Lore Lindu was devoted to the fabled Anaso Track, a 4-wheel-drive adventure which climbs five kilometers to a microwave tower through primary mountain forest. Target birds were Satanic (or Diabolical or Heinrich's) Nightjar, Geomalia and Great Shortwing. We missed Shortwing, but got the others above the hair-raising wooden Second Bridge, where we waited in vain for Purple-bearded Bee-Eater. Other Anaso Track delights included Blue-fronted Flycatcher, Chestnut-backed Bush-Warbler, Greater and Lesser Sulawesi Honeyeaters, Golden-mantled Racquet-Tail and Yellow-and-green Lorikeet.

The next day we hiked the short trail to Lake Taming for our first good dose of passerines such as Yellow-flanked Whistler, Pygmy Cuckoo Shrike, Sulawesi Thrush, Malea, Citrine Flycatcher, Streak-headed Dark-Eye, Snowy-browed Flycatcher and Mountain Serin. But the day's best sightings were mammals. Without a guidebook we had no idea what the small and huge tree-squirrel-looking critters were, but we know the big adult and immature furry jobs we watched grooming high in a tree are locally called Bear Cus Cus.

We ventured a bit farther south of the mountains the morning of 11 April, adding Blue-tailed Bee-Eater, Great Knot and Sulawesi Serpent Eagle to our list before driving back to Palu. Arriving there mid-afternoon, we had time for a sunset foray up the mountain west of the city. There we found White-shouldered Triller, Red Collared-Dove, Pale-headed Munia and Barred Buttonquail.

HALMAHERA, 14-17 April

The less said about 13 April, another birdless day of flying about on LionAir, the better. On the 14th we flew east across Weber's Line—the balance-point between Asian and Australo-Papuan faunal influences—from Manado to the steaming volcano and city of Ternate. This island is impressive only in its conical symmetry, but our 20-minute speedboat crossing of the birdless and trash-beset strait to the east left us in an even less inviting village: Sidangoli on Halmahera. The only birds to greet us were the ubiquitous Eurasian Tree Sparrows—always a bad sign. We checked in at the Penganapan Handayani homestay, which has two advantages: it is next door to the town's only restaurant, and it is the only place to stay. On the downside, it is surpassingly hot. We doubted it would support life during the day when there was no electricity, but at night we were able to sleep as long as the electric fan kept the mosquitos at bay. Down the street stands a bus shelter displaying portraits of Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussain, which, together with the town's recent bloody religious conflicts, was vaguely disquieting.

Let I imply that we didn't enjoy Halmahera, I should mention the birding. After a brief "rest," or attempt to extract oxygen from the hot and sodden air, we motored inland to a forest overlook called Gunung Bidadori, which means Paradise Mountain. This was the Wallace's Standardwing Bird-of-Paradise lek of David Attenborough's *Attenborough in Paradise*. The Standardwings later moved because of logging pressure, but the place-name still fits given the magical moments we spent birding there in the rain. Merely listing the life-birds—White Cockatoo, Blyth's Hornbill, Spectacled Imperial Pigeon, Red-cheeked and Eclectus Parrot, Grey-headed Fruit Dove—fails to capture the unearthly colors of the bird's feathers brought out by the rain. A memorable afternoon.

The next morning we learned why this part of Halmahera is called Kali Batu Putih (White Rock River) or just KBP. This refers to the bedrock, which is white chalk and limestone. Our target was the current Standardwing lek, and to reach it we had to negotiate a long, steep trail on slippery chalk in the rain and, of course, in the pre-dawn darkness. The river was in flood and the crossing a bit daunting, but we reached the lek just in time to witness a spectacular show. The male Standardwing is fully as impressive as we had expected, with the additional oddity that the breast shield, when flared in dawn's sunlight, was a vibrant royal blue rather than the green of the guidebook pictures. This was the first of many times we found that the Birds-of-Paradise must be seen to be believed. Following rest and hydration we enjoyed a stunning sunset on the mountains above Sidangoli, where the blazing Chattering Lorys rendered us speechless and we failed again to call Ivory-breasted Pitta within sight.

On the 16th we drove across the island and headed north toward Tobelo. Before it became too hot to breath we added Pied Imperial Pigeon, Paradise Crow (yes, it is in the Paradisaeidae), Moustached Treeswift, Brush Cuckoo, Blue-capped Fruit Dove, Rufous-necked Sparrow Hawk and, of all things, Eastern Great Reed-Warbler.

We raced back across the strait to Ternate the next day, and were delighted to see an actual pelagic bird in the person of our only Pomarine Jaeger of the trip. The ancient WingsAir Dash 8 eventually landed and we boarded eagerly with visions of Manado's bright lights dancing in our heads. In fact, Manado's waterfront Formosa Hotel is quite civilized. We had the luxury of charging camera batteries *and* going online for the first time in weeks. Over dinner I read the fine print of the sheet that came with the remarkable drugs Maria had used to knock out her eighth episode of malaria while we were on Halmahera. Seems it's a powerful experimental Chinese concoction available only in Indonesia, where malaria actually kills people. I was going to write down the name of the stuff for future use until I read that one of the potential side effects is "death."

SORONG, BATANTA, SALAWATI & SENAPANG, 18-23 April

We made our big move on 18 April. We exchanged Wallacean birds for those of Australo-Papua, and we noted significant racial, cultural and language differences when we landed at the port city of Sorong on the northwestern tip of New Guinea. Our mode of transport also shifted: we now travelled aboard a small but fast boat named the Mos Abru 02.

Our first birding venture was educational but not amusing. We sought Yellow-faced Myna in the hills behind Sorong, and Untu's anecdotes concerning the bird's recession from the coast over the past four years allowed us to quantify urban sprawl and the extent of illegal logging. Untu last found the bird a year ago at a place which is now a landfill (i.e. the city dump), but we needed another kilometer to get out of earshot of chainsaws and find primary forest. The Myna appeared as if by magic at that point, demonstrating that it is receding into the hills at about one kilometer per year. We also saw Fork-tailed Swift, Grey-headed Cuckoo Shrike, Pink-spotted Fruit Dove and Black-browed Triller beyond the dump.

The Mos Abru blasted down Sagewin Strait to Batanta Island in only two hours the next morning. Our beach accommodation on Batanta's south shore was simple and primitive yet idyllic—right out of *South Pacific*. A tree overhanging the main building was frequently decorated with Cockatoos, Imperial Pigeons, Hawks and Eagles. A babbling brook flows at precisely the right temperature for a refreshing bath after each birding hike. I amused the local villagers by snorkeling just off the beach. I'm sure the pale giant's antics were most entertaining, but I had the last laugh as this is some of the finest snorkeling on the planet. The variety of reef fish and all manner of marine invertebrates is remarkable for such a tiny bit of ten-foot-deep water. The rip as the tide goes out must be respected, but the only downside for me was the fire-coral living on one of the old dock pilings. I still bear the scars.

Upon arrival we wandered through the enchanted neighborhood and saw Brown Oriole, Pinon Imperial Pigeon, Glossy-mantled Manucode, Rufous-bellied Kookaburra and the mammoth Palm Cockatoo with its awesome bill designed to open

palm nuts.

At 4:00 AM on the 20th we began the two-hour climb to the Wilson's Bird-of-Paradise lek. The male vocalized enthusiastically and finally hopped about the edges of the lek between 6:40 and 6:50. We are among those who agree with David Attenborough's assessment of this bird, which states that photos and paintings fail utterly to represent the vibrant colors. When seen in the lek at close range, the bird somehow glows far too brightly in the twilight before dawn. It was the first of the BOPs to give us the impression of being lit from within, but by no means the last. After slipping and sliding back down the ridge, we devoted most of the day to snorkeling, snacking, bathing, snoozing and general sloth, but we nonetheless added Golden and Frilled Monarchs, Mimic Meliphaga, Hooded Butcherbird and others to our growing lists.

We crossed the strait to pick up our local guide Nelman next morning, then plunged into the Salawati jungle in search of King Bird-of-Paradise. It was hardly a "search," since Nelman had it staked out, and we were able to study a lovely male at our leisure. We also got the seldom seen Northern Scrub-Robin here, as well as Zoe Imperial Pigeon, Greater Black Coucal and Rusty Mouse-Warbler. This part of Salawati was alleged to have many chiggers, so we had a great excuse for a long snorkel with our clothes on when we returned to Batanta. A short walk inland toward sunset produced excellent, if distant, scope views of Red Bird-of-Paradise flopping about in the trees.

We again picked up Nelman on the 22nd and cruised around to the south shore of Salawati. Once more we hacked our way inland (Untu and all the local guides used sharp machetes on all the "trails") toward Western Crowned Pigeon. This is a simply outrageous bird, with a huge frilly bonnet only a hair-stylist could appreciate. The forest also contained Black Berrypecker, the only lowland representative of what was a life-family for us, and Western Black-capped Lory, but its most memorable inhabitants were the leeches we had been duly warned, so we wore rubber boots and soaked ourselves with every anti-pest preparation we possessed. Useless, useless. The trick was to have a quick walking stick and scrape the leeches off the boots before they gained the top, but they were pretty quick. If there were more than about ten on a boot, it was tough to get them all off before one dropped inside. Nelman goes barefoot in this forest. His feet are always very bloody, but he understands that leeches don't carry diseases and the bites don't hurt much. Ah well, each fox to his own hole.

We visited our favorite Batanta birds one more time that afternoon, and launched the Mos Abru into Sagewin Strait the next morning for our return to Sorong. The birding in the strait wasn't bad, with Black-naped, Common, Bridled and Crested Terns, Red-necked Phalarope, and one elegant Lesser Frigatebird. A huge Fin Whale blew several times near the boat. At the east end of the strait we carefully approached tiny Senapang Island. Beach Kingfisher is easy enough to spot from the strait, but it is necessary to land on this rocky islet to have a good chance for Spice Imperial Pigeon, Varied Honeyeater and Great-billed Parrot. We got the first two but missed the parrot in our twenty minutes of dashing along the jungle's edge in the surf. Arrival at Sorong made us long for Batanta, but we amused ourselves studying Eurasian Tree Sparrow society out our grimy window at the Waigo Hotel.

ARFAKMOUNTAIN, 24-28 April

The Sorong-Manokwari flight lasted only 40 minutes, but the 60-kilometer drive to Arfak Mountain took two hours. The road became steep and slippery after we passed the last ford and road-construction camp 48 km. from Manokwari. Primitive graveling and paving efforts continued intermittently to within 2 km. of Syobri Village, which I mention only because it is not hard to imagine the effect the upgrade from 4-wheel-drive track to highway will have on the wildlife.

We arrived at Syobri, a hamlet of some 15 houses and 60 Hatam-speaking people, and walked up to the Guest House, which stands at 2,000 meters. We met Zeth, our splendid local guide, and stepped into a forest of what Kathy described as "pricy house-plants." The town-and-garden birds included Western Mountain White-Eye, Black Fantail, Papuan Flowerpecker, White-shouldered Fairy Wren and a female Western Parotia.

After sleeping poorly in the cold mountain air, we were up at 4:00 and soon off to the Western Parotia lek. The 300-meter climb took an hour, with a sidetrip to a Vogelkop Bowerbird bower. Although the plainest of the bowerbirds, this bird builds the most elaborate bower. The male used the bits of blue paper we offered to build a lovely pyramid inside the bower. The scene mimicked a circus side-show, but it was not clear who was performing and who was laughing.

We had only glimpses of the male Western Parotia, but we saw Vogelkop Scrubwren as we climbed higher toward one of the best birds of the trip: a Feline Owlet-Nightjar which seemed unfazed by ten minutes of unremitting flash photography. Minutes later a Mountain Owlet-Nightjar was equally accommodating. Breaking out of the forest at 2,400 meters, we arrived at the Garden House. As we admired the view from this ridge-crest refuge, we noticed barefoot villagers dropping huge loads all about. This was our lunch, delivered only at the last moment to insure it was hot, and camping equipment for our night at the Garden House.

Indolence characterized most of the afternoon, but between 4:30 and 5:40 we experienced a magical bit of birding. We poked our heads out to see if the rain was slowing and happened to see a Friendly Fantail flapping about. Thus lured into the open, we proceeded to watch some twenty species of birds dart in and out of the mist. We never got more than 100 feet from the Garden House, but we saw exotic life-birds such as Red-collared Myzomela, Mountain Peltops, Western Smoky and Rufous-sided Honeyeaters, Sclater's Whistler, Black-breasted Boatbill, Red-breasted Pygmy Parrot, Modest Tiger Parrot . . . well, you get the idea. With darkness came our next hot meal on the shoulders of villagers who had set out from the Guest House kitchen 400 meters below. Two spent the night at the Garden House rather than descend in the dark; they built small fires in a corner several times during the night to keep warm.

Our target on the morning of the 26th was Black Sicklebill, perhaps the first of the Birds-of-Paradise to come to public attention when David Attenborough obtained a little grainy footage of a male in 1971. Its complete display performance was finally filmed in Papua's Foya Mountains only in 2007, and we caught only a brief glimpse of an adult male, but we did watch a female and juvenile at a nest while the male's whip-lash calls echoed all about. Our climb from the Garden House took us up to about 2,600 meters in yet another avifaunal zone, so we quickly ticked off Mountain Mouse-Warbler, Perplexing Scrubwren, Plum-faced Lorikeet, Regent Whistler, Papuan Treecreeper, Garnet Robin, and two birds right at the top of our wants list: Arfak Astrapia and Tit Berrypecker, which has recently been split off into a new family and was our Bird of the Day over even the Sicklebill. The afternoon's long descent to Syobri in the rain was steep and difficult.

I slept in the next day, arising only at the unconscionable hour of 8:00 AM. I might have tried harder, but I misunderstood the dawn target to be Magnificent Riflebird. When Kathy returned at 9:00 glowing from seeing Magnificent Bird-of-Paradise, I vowed to try for the bird next morning if we could delay our departure for Manokwari long enough. In the meantime, I enjoyed several hours of birding in the rain from the shelter of the Guest House porch. Patient scope work on difficult small passerines netted Dwarf Honeyeater, Large and Pale-billed Scrubwrens, Blue-grey Robin and Dwarf Whistler.

The last day of a birding trip is often charmed, and that was certainly true of 28 April. Assisted by both Untu and Zeth, I managed to reach the Magnificent Bird-of-Paradise dancing ground at dawn. Untu and I were in the tiny blind from 6:15 until 7:00. Words can't adequately describe what we saw, but suffice it to say a male and three females put on the most amazing display I have ever seen. The male finally went through his whole seduction routine and copulated with one of the females six feet from where I sat spellbound.

We continued to see dandy new birds as we walked back to the Guest House—Island Leaf-Warbler, Yellow-bellied Longbill, Mountain Meliphaga, Papuan Lorikeet—and then it was time to leave. As we loaded the SUV that had returned right on schedule, a New Guinea Harpy Eagle soared over to bid us farewell. We drove back to Manokwari, spent a comfortable night at the Mansinam Beach Resort across from the island where Alfred Russell Wallace lived 150 years ago, flew on to Manado via Makassar the next day, and finally left Indonesia bound for Singapore on April 30th.

NOTES

Tour Company: We recommend *contracting Papua Bird Club directly* to bird eastern equatorial Indonesia. They are at www.papuabirdclub.com and papuabirdclub@hotmail.com. PBC was reorganized following the death of its founder Kris Tindige in 2007 by Kris' widow Maria and lead-guide Untu. They are the only birders positioned to frequently scout current locations and access for the Wallacea and Papua "target" birds, including all the western Birds-of-Paradise—Untu is off scouting for PBC's next clients as I write—and they maintain good relations with the local guides and villagers. The international bird-tour companies use PBC for arrangements and logistics in this region, but if contracted directly PBC's tour prices are about half those of the foreign companies. The entire cost of a PBC tour goes directly into one of the world's weakest economies, and PBC uses so much of the money for conservation and education in the local villages that the company retains little profit.

Logistics: Getting to Manado was easy, but coordinating *domestic travel, accommodation and appropriate food* required constant attention by PBC. Our 10 flights, 7 small-boat trips, and a marvelous selection of cars, vans and SUVs were safe and as comfortable as possible. The hotels, "home-stays" (private homes or inns/posadas) and rustic cabins were the best accommodations available at the various birding sites, and the meals suited the western palate far better than we had anticipated.

Guidebooks: The only useful bird guides are Coates and Bishop's *A Guide to the Birds of Wallacea*, which may still be available from Amazon.com (U.K. only), and Beehler et al *Birds of New Guinea*, which can occasionally be found on the internet for \$400+. Princeton Press will publish an updated New Guinea book eventually, but not until at least 2010. PBC will have a copy of the relevant book in the field, but you'll want your own. The photo guides, such as Strange's *Birds of Indonesia*, simply don't illustrate enough birds.

Difficulty: This is *strenuous birding*. Many of the "best" birds require long, steep, muddy, wet and insect-ridden pre-dawn hikes to cramped blinds/hides. We are in our 60's and got to all the birds only with help from Untu and local guides.

Weather: April is far from the wettest month, but it *rained every day*. Bring rubber boots, rainsuits and umbrellas. Your spectacles and all your optics will fog up, particularly when you have only a second to get on a BOP. Practice dropping your glasses and folding up your binocular eye-cups in order to use the half-second before the eye-pieces fog up.

Disease: *Malaria* is not to be taken lightly here. If you don't take Larium/Mefloquine or equivalent, good luck!

Annoyances: Minor inconveniences include chiggers at Tangkoko, humid heat on Halmahera, leeches on Salawati, mosquitos everywhere, and, incredibly, I was injured by fire-coral while snorkeling at Batanta. Political, ethnic and religious differences are sometimes exacerbated by poverty and over-population, resulting in unpleasantness of various sorts, but if you follow your guide's lead and resist arrogance and condescension you should see none of this. No volcanos seem inclined to erupt, major earthquakes should stay well to the south in the Indian Ocean, and there are no dangerous critters of any size.
