

Bird Watching in Wasur National Park, Merauke, Papua

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Background

Purpose: We visited Wasur National Park (*Taman Nasional Wasur*, TN Wasur), Friday 25 – Monday 28 October 2013. Our purpose was bird watching which proved productive despite the dry conditions. We were also interested to visit what is one of the largest wetlands in Indonesia and to gain some understanding of its ecology, habitats and flora and fauna.

Acknowledgements: A preliminary internet search produced some useful information about Wasur, in particular Nick Brickle's most informative bird watching reports⁴ - he recorded 174 bird species over two trips in July and November 2009. We are grateful to Nick for his advice on planning our trip.

Pak Yarman⁵, senior officer, TN Wasur, Merauke, was our principle contact and made all arrangements including guide and motorbikes/drivers. Pak Yarman specialises in the involvement of ethnic communities within the Park in its management and conservation.

We met Pak Amin⁶, senior officer, TN Wasur, Merauke, with whom Bob discussed birds and their identification. Amin specialises in birds and is compiling a list for the Park. He informed that to date he has recorded 403 species and showed us spectacular bird photos taken within the Park.

Pak Aprianto⁷, also TN Wasur staff, was our guide together with two Park police who also served as our motorbike drivers, with us riding pillion and luggage in pannier bags over the back wheel.

We express our appreciation to Pak Yarman, Amin and Aprianto as well as the two Park police who made our visit possible and so rewarding.

Finally, Nick wishes to express his appreciation to Bob for having had the opportunity to travel with such an experienced bird watcher. Bob recorded 105 bird species during our four-day trip. His bird list is attached.

Location: The Park, established in 1997, lies within the Trans Fly region that extends across southern New Guinea. The Park is located in the south-eastern most tip of the Indonesian province of Papua, Kabupaten Merauke, and is delineated by: east - border between Indonesia and Papua New Guinea (PNG); north-west – Maro river; south-west – Arafura sea. Total area - 413,810 ha. The Park is easily accessible from Merauke, with its western boundary lying just beyond the town limits. The highway, from Merauke to Tanah Merah to the north, passes through the Park (see map – Attachment 1).

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² Nick also visited Tanah Merah, 475 kms north of Merauke where the Dutch had established the Boven Digoel camp for political exiles in 1927, and whose inmates included Hatta, Sutan Sjahrir and other pre-independence political activists.

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⁴ <http://burung-nusantara.org/birding-sites/papua/wasur/>

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Climate and Seasonal Access to the Park: Wasur is a vast area of lowlands nowhere more than about 20 ms ASL. Much of the Park is inundated during the wet season and becomes impenetrable swampland. About November-March is the 'wet' while April-October are the drier months (see Attachment 2: Climate Chart)⁸. But even after the 'wet', it still takes several months for the swamps to recede and dry out before travel by wheeled vehicle including motorbike is possible. August to November are the better months for visiting the Park.

This limited seasonal access presents a challenge for the Park authorities. On the one hand, they welcome visitors for whom they need to provide staff as guides, motorbike drivers, etc. but, on the other, this is also the time when they need their staff for policing and other works within the Park.

Habitats: Wetlands International⁹ describes Wasur as "a low-lying wetland in the monsoon climate zone of southern New Guinea, with intertidal mudflats and coastal mangroves, extensive seasonally inundated grasslands, reed swamps, savannahs, and monsoon forest. The site is the habitat for a number of rare and endemic species, including the Fly River Grassbird (*Megalurus albolimbatus*) and Grey-crowned Munia (*Lonchura nevermanni*). Tens of thousands of water birds visit the region during migration between eastern Siberia and northern Australia." TN Wasur identifies some 14 habitats each with its unique flora and fauna.

"The topography is exceptionally flat, with little natural drainage in large parts of the reserve. Land use is chiefly subsistence farming by (indigenous) communities ... , and the area contains many sites of spiritual significance and archaeological importance. Poaching and alien invasive species like water hyacinth and *mimosa pigra*¹⁰, as well as population pressures from the nearby town of Merauke, are seen as the greatest threats."

Park Management : WWF¹¹ observes: "While indigenous involvement in the management of the Park is still limited, the Park has achieved greater recognition of *adat* (customary) rights than almost any other conservation area in Indonesia. Rights of indigenous communities to hunt and collect certain animals and plants have been recognised and they contribute traditional knowledge and advice to Park planning."

Hunting of deer, the introduced rusa deer, *Cervus timorensis*, is permitted; its dried meat, *dendeng*, is available in Merauke. Earlier, there were reports¹² of a 'population explosion' of rusa deer changing the ecology of the Park to the extent that the wallaby population was declining. Deer hunting seems to have reversed this trend and some degraded woodlands are re-establishing. However, it was unclear whether the wallaby population is on the rise again. Communities within the Park are permitted to hunt wallabies using traditional techniques.

We were impressed by the extent to which the Park authorities seek to involve the traditional communities in its management as well as enforcing the ban on poaching.

International Collaboration: Indonesia is a signatory to the *Intergovernmental Convention on Wetlands of International Importance* (8 August 1992, known as the Ramsar Convention) that provides the framework for national action and international cooperation for the conservation and

⁸ Merauke rainfall chart: <http://www.merauke.climatemps.com/>

⁹ http://www.ramsar.org/cda/en/ramsar-pubs-notes-anno-indonesia/main/ramsar/1-30-168%5E16563_4000_0__

¹⁰ Giant sensitive tree, bashful plant, cat claw mimosa, giant mimosa, thorny sensitive plant; noxious weed, Class I in Australia.

¹¹ See, e.g.: *Integrating Cultural Values to Preserve Trans Fly region* - <http://www.wwf.or.id/index.cfm?unewsid=3740&ulangid=1>

¹² See, e.g., <http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/ebafactsheet.php?id=179>

wise use of wetlands and their resources. Wasur is one of six wetland regions within Indonesia (Attachment 3) recognized under this Convention.

PNG established a similar conservation reserve adjacent to Wasur on its side of the border in 1975 - Tonda Wildlife Management Area. This park, of 590 000 ha, aims to protect wildlife species from overhunting and attract sustainable development in partnership with local communities¹³.

Wasur (Indonesia) and Tonda (PNG) have cross-border collaboration and coordination for conservation and management purposes in association with WWF, Bird Life International and Wetlands International. Migrant waterbirds travel seasonally between the Trans Fly and northern Australia. The Kakadu National Park, in the Northern Territory of Australia, a wetland area, is also associated with this program.

Program

We planned our visit to be at Wasur towards the end of the dry season for ease of travel around the Park. The low-lying swamps had already dried out leaving only occasional waterholes. Despite overcast conditions, we did not experience any rain; travel by motorbike was quite possible. Given the dry conditions, many of the migratory water birds had moved on leaving only a few stragglers.

Friday 25 - Merauke-Tabukar (evening): Tabukar lies north of the main highway to Tanah Merah (turn-off at 60 km); accessible by motorbike.

Habitat: monsoon forest (very dry during our visit with no surface water). Birds such as: Honeyeater sp, Palm Cockatoo, Dollarbird, Imperial Pigeon sp, Cuckoo Dove, Greater Bird of Paradise, Little Corella, Sulphur-crested Cockatoo, fresh signs of Cassowary.

Camp: on raised platforms under shelters in gardens owned and occasionally visited by villagers; potable water some distance from camp.

Saturday 26 - Tabukar (morning): to a waterhole in monsoon forest that proved more productive for bird watching than the forest of the previous afternoon; also a good camp site.

Saturday 26 - Kankania swamp (afternoon): returned to highway; at km 44 from Merauke turned south along a concrete road but with a broken bridge only passable by motorbike; waterhole where bird watching could be productive; it would also make for a good camp site. This road leads to Rawa Biru, 'blue swamp', and a village by that name within the Park.

We left this road, about halfway to Rawa Biru, and travelled via bush tracks to Kankania swamp that had already dried out. We biked for what seemed hours through the bush with our guide using his GPS to find the way. Avoiding low-hanging branches and ruts in the track, formed earlier by motorbikes when the soil was still wet, was a challenge for the drivers and pillion passengers.

Habitat: en route to Kankania swamp - savannah with paperbark (*Melaleuca* sp) and *cajuput* (*Melaleuca leucadendra*)¹⁴ predominant. Many parrots present particularly around the waterhole (broken bridge) where we saw the only Red-Cheeked Parrot of the trip. Much of the undergrowth had been burnt or was still burning. It was a joy to see Blue-winged Kookaburra in flight.

Kankania swamp - this is an extensive area of completely flat land ('guestimate' - 2,000 hectares) inundated in the wet season but dry during our visit and covered entirely by *cajuput* seedlings that, at the time of our visit, were no more than 30 cms high. Whether this is the normal cycle due to annual

¹³ <http://ramsar.rgis.ch/pdf/lib/hbk4-07cs15.pdf>

¹⁴ The common name for *Melaleuca leucadendra* is *cajuput* derived from *kayu putih* meaning 'white wood'.

inundation, or burning, was not clear. Certainly, the *cajuput* never develops into dense stands on the swamp.

Birds: most memorable were Brolga, Straw-necked Ibis and Little Curlew but few in number as most had already departed due to absence of water.

Animals: one of our motorbike drivers saw a wallaby and a deer in the early morning, the only sightings during our trip.

Camp: on the edge of Kankania swamp in paperbark forest; no water; very pleasant.

Sunday 2 - to Ndalir, Kuler district, TN Wasur Guard Post II: another long motorbike ride through the Park to the south-west until reaching the road running along the coast from Merauke towards the PNG border; emerged onto this coast road at Tomerau.

Habitat: through paperbark savannah with ecology changing as we approached the coast; passed several waterholes; cattle-grazing country with pandanus palms towards the coast; monsoon forest nearer the coast; mangroves along the coast.

Camp: Ndalir, Pos TN Wasur II, is one of the posts for controlling the Park; simple but pleasant accommodation.

Sunday 27 evening and Monday 28 morning – bird watching at Ndalir

Habitats: many habitats exist within walking distance; beach, mangrove, reed swamp, paperback, monsoon forest; excellent bird watching.

Monday 28 afternoon – returned to Merauke

Suggestions for Future Visits

Visitors to the Park: The Park authorities welcome visitors; nevertheless, we were conscious that we were placing additional demands on their limited staff and resources. Management plans to accommodate visitors are still in an early stage. We would suggest that groups be limited to no more than three or four people and be prepared for rough travel and camping.

Proposed Program: you should plan your program after reviewing information contained in Nick Brickle's and this report as well as anything else available in the internet that interests you. There are many habitats to explore depending upon season/accessibility and time available as well as your interests. Besides ecology, flora and fauna and bird watching, visitors may also be interested in the communities within the Park, how they interact with the Park and the management plans for accommodating these communities.

If one's interest is principally bird watching, 3-4 days might suffice for an initial visit. Extra days would produce more birds at each location with forays further out. If visiting during the dry season, enquire about the location of residual waterholes where birds are most likely to congregate. Pak Amin can advise; he knows many other bird watching locations such as Mblatar (see Nick Brickle's report) not visited by us.

All arrangements should be made through the TN Wasur office, Merauke.

Surat Keterangan Jalan (Travel Permit): an SJK is necessary for travel in Papua and may be obtained in advance in Jakarta through an agent or upon arrival in Merauke but the latter may take additional time. When requesting an SJK, ensure that you mention all places that you intend to visit in Papua. Our SJKs gave the reason for visit as *kunjungan* – 'visit'. You must report to the police in Merauke upon arrival.

SAMASKI: this is a permit issued by the Wasur Park office for visitors to enter the Park. The Park authorities advised us to send scanned copies of our documents in advance so that the permits would be available upon arrival.

Logistics: The trip overall was excellent but the long motorbike rides from Tabukar to Kankania and the next day to Ndalir were strenuous. Travel by motorbike was too quick to observe birds while passing through interesting and changing habitats.

We travelled pillion with gear in pannier bags. Generally, motorbike is the only practical means of transport within much of the Park. You could consider driving your own motorbike – preferably a cross-country model – rather than riding pillion. Ensure that the motorbike has a frame for pannier bags so that bags do not rub on the back wheel; also, that you carry sufficient extra fuel for the trip. Wear a crash helmet if for no other reason than hitting your head on low-hanging branches as you motor through the bush.

Travel by 4-WD vehicle is a possibility but would be much slower, much more costly and access to many places limited or even impossible. Some combination of motorbike/Kijang-type vehicle could be an option to minimise motorbike travel and make the trip easier, more enjoyable and quicker for a wider audience. For example:

- vehicle from Merauke along the highway to the Tabukar turn off; with a 2-3 km walk (or motorbikes) into the Tabukar camp; motorbikes would still be needed to reach the waterhole that we visited on the second morning.
- vehicle from Tabukar towards Rawa Biru/Kankania along the concrete road to the point where the bridge is broken; thereafter motorbikes.
- vehicle along the coast road: if crossing the Park from north to south by motorbike, you could be met by vehicles at Tomerau.

Guide: essential for travelling within the Park; *Park police* (from local communities) for interacting with these communities. Indonesian is the *lingua franca* within southern Papua.

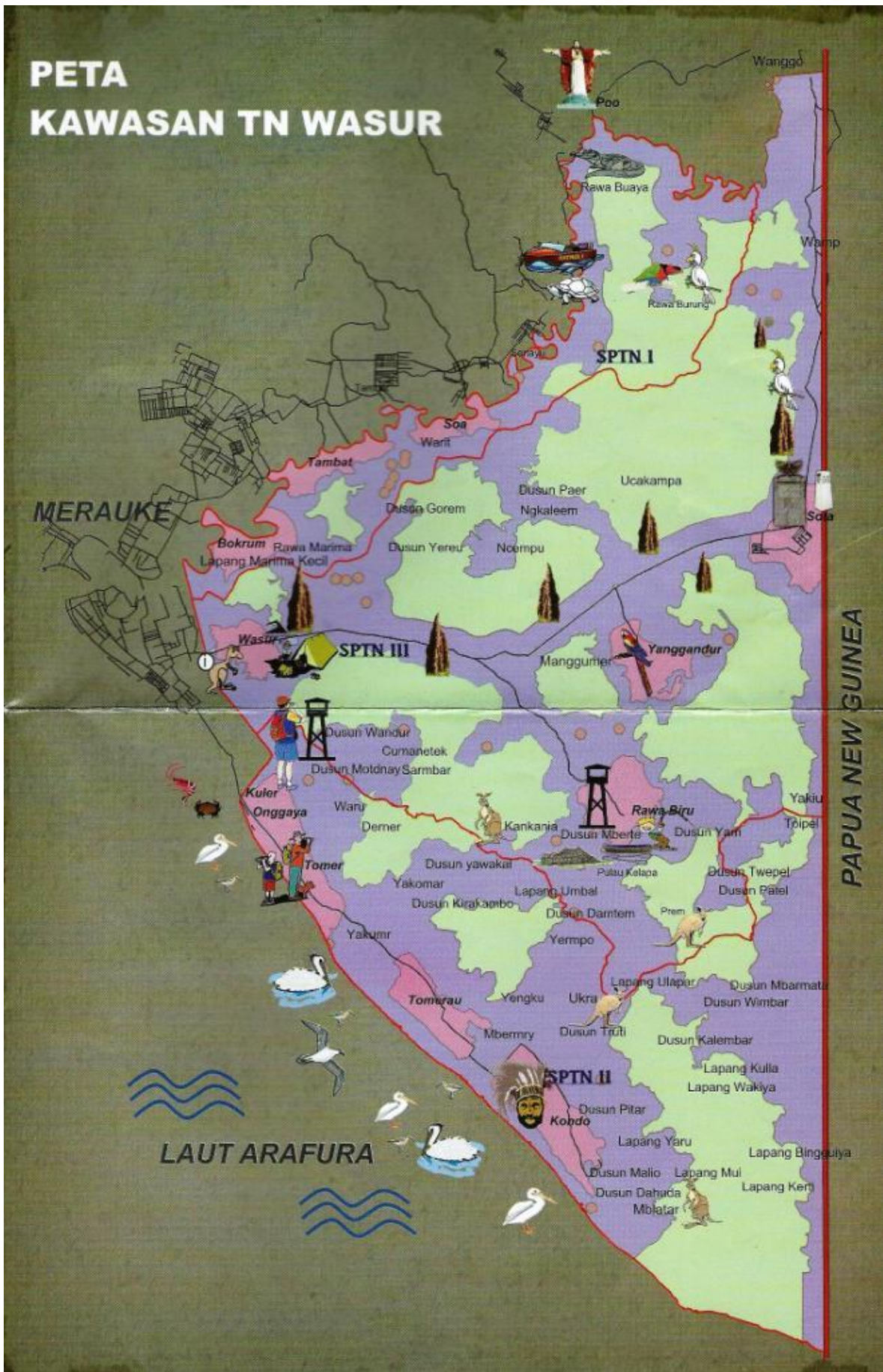
Camping, food, etc : tents are unnecessary in the dry season; being at near sea level, only a light cover is needed to protect from insects, etc. Assume malaria in the lowlands of New Guinea - mosquito nets, repellent and prophylactic drugs.

Our guide, Aprianto, was an excellent cook; he had prepared well and we ate well. Arrange with your guide about food and water before departure.

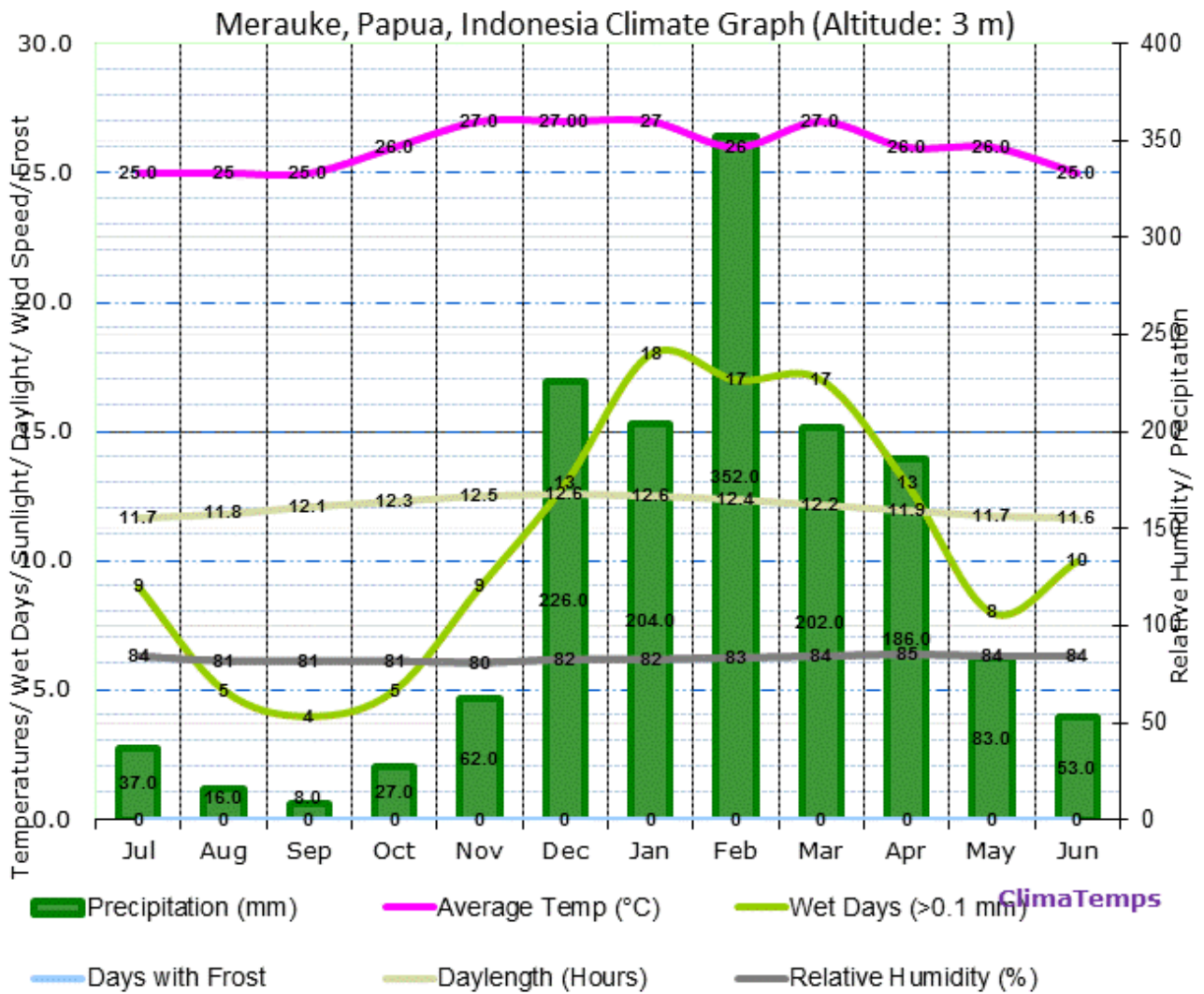
Water was an issue. During the dry season, water in the receding waterholes is undrinkable even with boiling. Budget on at least three litres per day with extra for cooking; bring bottled water from Merauke and/or plan on resupply en route. Take water sterilization tablets in the event of an emergency.

Flights to Merauke: we travelled Lion Air - non-stop, overnight from Jakarta to Jayapura and onward to Merauke by the same flight. The return flight was likewise with a stop in Makassar.

Budget: Pak Yarman had provided a budget for the trip including park fees and related expenses – guide, motorbikes, drivers, food, etc. The fees and other costs were very reasonable. (Contact Nick Hughes for details.



Attachment 1: Map of Wasur National Park



Attachment 2: Climate Chart - Merauke

Attachment 3

Indonesian Wetlands recognized under the RAMSAR Convention

Name	Area (km²)
Berbak (Jambi)	1,627
Danau Sentarum (West Kalimantan)	800
Pulau Rambut Wildlife Reserve (DI Jakarta)	0.90
Rawa Aopa Watumohai National Park (South-East Sulawesi)	1,051.94
Wasur National Park (Papua)	4,138.1
Sembilang National Park (South Sumatera)	2,028.96

	<u>25 to 28 October 2013</u>	<u>Wasur</u>	<u>Habitat</u>	<u>Notes</u>
1	Southern Cassowary	Droppings only	Monsoon Forest Tabukar near Yanggandur	
2	Little Pied Cormorant	1	Large marsh reed beds behind Ndalir	
3	Sacred Ibis	1 in flight	From Forest Guard Post at Ndalir	
4	Straw necked Ibis	1 of 30+	Grassland at Kankania	
5	Australian Pelican	2 of 1 and 2 (sea)	Large marsh reed beds behind Ndalir	
6	Brolga	1 of 4	Grassland at Kankania	
7	Striated Heron	5 of 1 or 2	Mud flats at Ndalir	
8	Cattle Egret	10+	Between Kankania and Ndalir	
9	Little Egret	20+	Mud flats at Ndalir	
10	Intermediate Egret	20+	Regular	
11	Great Egret	10+	Mud flats at Ndalir	
12	Pacific Black Duck	40+	Large marsh reed beds behind Ndalir	
13	White-headed Shelduck	3 in flight	Large marsh reed beds behind Ndalir	
14	Little Eagle	1 in flight	Road to Yanggandur	probable - dark phase
15	Grey Goshawk	1 in flight	Savannah Forest next to marsh behind Ndalir	
16	Brahminy Kite	1 seen by NH	Savannah Forest next to marsh behind Ndalir	
17	Whistling Kite	5+	Forest near Kankania	
18	Swamp Harrier	1	Large marsh reed beds behind Ndalir	
19	Red-necked Rail	1	In mangrove behind Forest Guard Post	
20	Red-kneed Dotterel	3 of 1	Large marsh reed beds behind Ndalir	
21	Mongolian Plover	5+	Mud flats at Ndalir	
22	Lesser Golden Plover	1 of 2	Coastal bar near Ndalir	
23	Masked Lapwing	1 seen by NH	Large marsh reed beds behind Ndalir	
24	Eastern Curlew	10+	Mud flats at Ndalir	
25	Whimbrel	20+	Mud flats at Ndalir	
26	Little Curlew	20+	Grassland at Kankania	
27	Black-tailed Godwit	50+	Coastal bar near Ndalir	
28	White-headed Stilt	100+	Mud flats at Ndalir	
29	Curlew Sandpiper	a few	Large marsh reed beds behind Ndalir	
30	Red-necked Stint	20+	Mud flats at Ndalir	
31	Sharp-tailed Sandpiper	40+	Mud flats at Ndalir	
32	Common Sandpiper	1	Creek at Ndalir	
33	Terek Sandpiper	20+	Mud flats at Ndalir	
34	Common Redshank	2	Mud flats at Ndalir	
35	Common Greenshank	10+	Mud flats at Ndalir	
36	Whiskered Tern	30+	Mud flats at Ndalir	
37	Little Tern	3	Mud flats at Ndalir	
38	Black-naped Tern	10's	Mud flats at Ndalir	
39	Gull-billed Tern	2	Mud flats at Ndalir	
40	Stephan's Dove	3 of 1	Savannah Forest at Tabukar near Yanggandur	
41	Bar-shouldered Dove	20+	Regular	
42	Peaceful Dove	5 of 1 or 2	Kankania to Ndalir	
43	Brown Cuckoo-Dove	3 of 1	Swamp forest near Tabukar near Yanggandur	
44	Orange-bellied Fruit-Dove	1	Perched up at Tabukar near Yanggandur	Many fruit-doves
45	Orange-fronted Fruit Dove	2 of 1 and 2	2 at Swamp forest Tabukar near Yanggandur, 1 behind Ndalir	seen in flight from singles to flocks of
46	Coroneted Fruit-Dove	1 of 6	Savannah Forest next to marsh behind Ndalir	30 quick and or
47	Dwarf Fruit-Dove ??	1	Very small dove in flight Tabukar near Yanggandur	distant and not identifiable.
48	Pied Imperial Pigeon	200+	Daily	
49	Purple-tailed Imperial	1 of 5	In perched flock w/Pied IP at Tabukar near	

	Pigeon		Yanggandur	
50	Pinon Imperial pigeon	2 of 1	Fly-by at Tabukar near Yanggandur	
51	Red-flanked Lorikeet	10 or so	Tabukar near Yanggandur	
52	Rainbow Lorikeet	100+	Regular	
53	Red-cheeked Parrot	1	At road stop to Kankania	
54	Sulphur-crested Cockatoo	1 of 2	Tabukar near Yanggandur	
55	Little Corella	1 by NH	Tabukar near Yanggandur	
56	Palm Cockatoo	1 of 1 and 2	Around Camp at Tabukar near Yanggandur	
57	Pheasant Coucal	5 or so of 1	Regular	
58	Rufous-bellied Kookaburra	1	Savannah at Tabukar near Yanggandur	
59	Blue-winged Kookaburra	10	Throughout	
60	Sacred Kingfisher	3 of 1	Kankania to Ndalir track	
61	Azure kingfisher	1	Creek at Ndalir	
62	Little Kingfisher	1	Creek at Ndalir	
63	Forest Kingfisher	1	Kankania to Ndalir track	
64	Dollarbird	20+ of 1	Regular	
65	Blue-tailed Bee-eater	10+	Kankania Grassland	
66	Large-tailed Nightjar	1	Heard at Tabukar near Yanggandur	
67	Fork-tailed Swift	1	over Tabukar near Yanggandur	
68	White-breasted Woodswallow	1	Ndalir	
69	Welcome Swallow	a few	Airport and Meruake	
70	Black-faced Cuckoo-Shrike	1 of 2	Farmland near Park HQ	
71	White-bellied Cuckoo-Shrike	10+	Savannah at Tabukar near Yanggandur	
72	Cicadabird	1	Savannah at Tabukar near Yanggandur	probable
73	Brown Oriole	1	Savannah at Tabukar near Yanggandur	
74	Golden Cuckoo Shrike	1 of 2 (m & f)	Camp at Tabukar near Yanggandur	
75	Varied Triller	1 (m)	Savannah at Tabukar near Yanggandur	
76	Emperor Fairy-wren	1 of 3 (m and 2f)	Ndalir thick scrub near Forest Guard Post	
77	White-shouldered Fairy-wren	2 of 2	Ndalir thick scrub near Forest Guard Post	
78	Fairy Gerygone	1	Mangroves near Forest Guard Post	
79	Large-billed Gerygone	2 of 2	Flowering tree in front of Guard Post	
80	Mangrove Gerygone	1 of 1	Behind Guard Post Ndalir	
81	Black thicket Fantail	1	Mangrove behind Guard Post	
82	Northern Fantail	2 of 1	Tabukar near Yanggandur swamp forest and Ndalir savannah forest	
83	Willy Wagtail	3 of 1	Ndalir	
84	Shining Flycatcher	3 of 1 or 2	Mangroves behind Guard Post	
85	Papuan Flowerpecker	3 of 1 or 2	Forest behind Ndalir	
86	Brown Honeyeater	1	Isolated trees at Kankania grassland	
87	Rufous-banded Honeyeater	1	In savannah forest behind Ndalir	
88	Olive-backed Sunbird	3 of 1 or 2	Ndalir	
89	Black Sunbird	1	Behind Guard Post Ndalir	
90	Dusky Myzomela	3 of 1	Flowering tree in front of Guard Post	
91	Papuan Black Myzomela	3 of 2 or 3	Monsoon Forest Tabukar near Yanggandur	
92	Mimic Meliphaga	3 of 1 or 2	Flowering tree in front of Guard Post	
93	Graceful Meliphaga	4-6 of 1 or 2	Monsoon Forest Tabukar near Yanggandur	
94	Tawny-breasted Honeyeater	5 to 10 of 1 or 2	throughout	
95	Noisy Friarbird	10 to 20 of 1 or 2	Savannah forest Tabukar near Yanggandur	
96	Grey-crowned Babbler	4 of 4 to 10	throughout	
97	White-eared Catbird	1 of 2	Savannah Forest next to marsh behind Ndalir	
98	Fawn-breasted Bowerbird	5 of 1 or 2	Swamp forest near Tabukar near Yanggandur	

99	Greater Bird of Paradise	3 of 1 or 2	Tabukar near Yanggandur camp and swamp forest (1 non-breeding male)
100	Spangled Drongo	5 of 1 or 2	regular
101	Glossy-mantled Manucode	10 of 1 to 5	regular
102	Black Butcherbird	1	Behind Guard Post Ndalir
103	Black-backed Butcherbird	20 of 1 or 2	regular
104	Torresian Crow	4 of 1 or 2	regular
105	Australian Magpie	3 of 1	Kankania area
	Tabukar: name for area of monsoon forest near Yanggandur		