

# BIRDS OF THE PLESYUMI AREA, CENTRAL NEW BRITAIN

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The interior of New Britain, unlike that of much of neighboring New Guinea, remains largely undisturbed. Except at the northern end of the Gazelle Peninsula, roads, airstrips and cultivation have been confined to the immediate vicinity of the coast. Little has been published on the birds of the interior, and indeed few ornithologists have penetrated it. Gilliard collected at over 1800 m in the Whiteman Mountains in 1958-9; his report (Gilliard and LeCroy 1967) gives a history of earlier collecting. More recently, Diamond (1971) worked in West New Britain. I observed birds during a brief trip into central New Britain in an area that has not been previously investigated ornithologically.

The Plesyumi area lies approximately 56 km SSE of Kimbe, in the eastern foothills of the Whiteman Mountains (fig. 1). It consists of the valley of the upper Metelin River and its tributary, the Lae River, which form part of the extensive Kapiura River system draining to the north coast. The entire area is covered with primary rain forest, except for small clearings at prospector camps established as a joint operation of the Amdex Mining Co. and Placer Prospecting (Australia) Pty. Ltd. The nearest native settlement is Paspas (Metelin) Village, located 24 km to the north.

I travelled by helicopter from Kimbe to a prospector camp on the Lae River on 1 November 1973 (site 1 in fig. 1). The camp lies at 275 m elevation, at the base of a steep ridge rising to over 400 m to the west. On 2 November I followed a 4 km trail along a ridge to the southeast leading to Windy Camp (site 2 in fig. 1) which is situated at 450 m overlooking the gorge of the Metelin River. The trail traversed a relatively level area averaging about 400 m but rising to 530 m at one point; except at each end, the trail was situated in a closed-canopy rain forest with an approximate canopy height of 30-35 m. On 3 November I returned to Kimbe from the Lae River camp.

I identified 35 species of birds, and recorded others with less certainty. In the annotated list below I have included local bird names used by Paspas villagers employed by the prospecting companies. The local knowledge of the birds appeared not to be exhaustive, although several species were im-

mediately recognized by local residents from drawings I made or in the field; some quite striking species appeared to be unknown to these people. The local inhabitants speak the Nakanai language used widely on the north coast, and the names I recorded are different from both those recorded by Gilliard (Gilliard and LeCroy 1967) on the southern slopes of the Whiteman Range and those recorded at Garu, near Talasea, by Miniotas and Lindgren (1972). However, I recorded some of the same names at Talasea, and Dahl (1899) recorded similar ones at Ralun on the Gazelle Peninsula. I have included some behavioral notes made at Talasea and Rabaul from 30 October to 5 November 1973.

## SPECIES ACCOUNTS

*Henicopernis infusata*. New Britain Buzzard. One adult of this rarely seen, black hawk, boldly barred with white on the tail and flight feathers, was observed soaring over the ridge west of Lae Camp 3 November. The wings are strikingly long and broadly fingered, and are held at the horizontal, in the same manner as an *H. longicauda* seen on New Guinea. Brown and Amadon (1968) commented on the specific rank of this form.

*Gallirallus insignis*. New Britain Rail. This rail was well known to local people, who immediately identified it from a drawing. A cackling call heard in the forest along the trail on 2 November was identified as coming from this species by my two guides. The call of this rail was described by Gilliard and LeCroy (1967:189) as "short loud calls and some deep notes." A "series of very strong raucous calls" heard near Garu village was attributed to this bird by Miniotas and Lindgren (1972). Diamond (1972a) described a call given in duet as "low-pitched, harsh and suggestive of a dog or a pig rather than that of a bird"; this seems to be a different vocalization than the one I heard. The local name was "Kwekwek" (presumably onomatopoeic). For the generic allocation of this rail see Olson (1973).

*Macropygia* sp. Cuckoo Dove. A small cuckoo dove, either *M. nigrirostris* or *M. mackinlayi*, was flushed from a nest along the trail on 2 November. The nest was in an epiphytic fern about 8.5 m up a small tree and contained a single white egg. As *M. mackinlayi* is more typical of second growth (Miniotas and Lindgren 1972), it is likely that the bird was *M. nigrirostris*, a species whose nest has not ever been previously described (Goodwin 1970). Heinroth (1902) recorded a clutch of two eggs in June, and a bird with a strongly developed ovary taken in February.

*Ptilinopus rivoli*. White-bibbed Fruit Dove. The calls of this species—a series of short coos, dropping in pitch at the end of the sequence—were commonly heard in the forest although the birds were

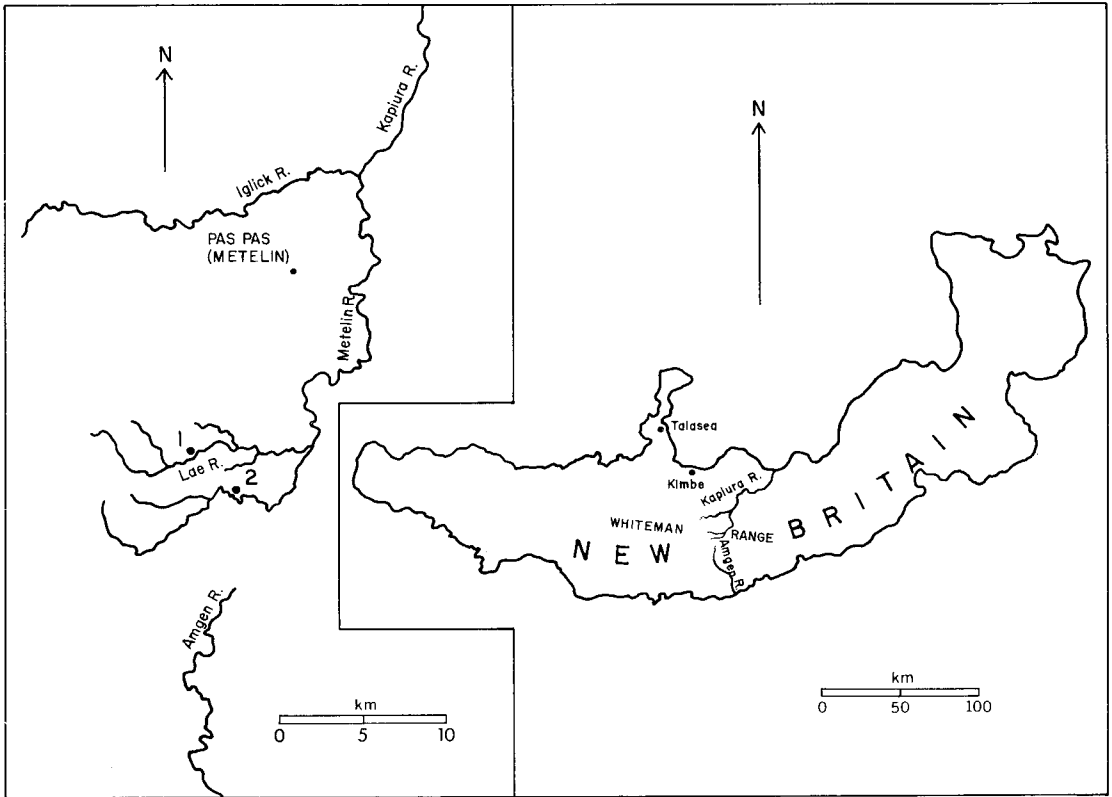


FIGURE 1. Map of New Britain (right) with insert showing the Plesyumi area. The camps at the ends of the trail mentioned in the text are indicated: (1) Lae Camp; (2) Windy Camp.

very difficult to find. Other *Ptilinopus*-type calls were also heard, including what was probably that of the Knob-billed Fruit Dove (*P. insolitus*), later identified in the Rabaul area.

*Ducula rubricera*. Red-knobbed Imperial Pigeon. Very common in the forest canopy, and frequently heard. One call was a rather raucous coo ("oowa-oo") that rose in pitch and was variously reminiscent of a lowing cow or a distant locomotive whistle. Another call was a smoother, rising and falling "oowoopoowoo."

*Ducula finschii*. Bronze Imperial Pigeon. I saw one in the top of a tall tree, apparently in fruit, along the trail on the afternoon of 2 November. The tree was also being visited by *D. rubricera* and *Aceres plicatus*.

The pidgin name for all species of pigeon is "Balus." Local people distinguished between small green pigeons (*Ptilinopus*), the larger arboreal species, and terrestrial forms (*Gallicolumba* or possibly *Henicophaps*). A rough hooting call was identified by them as belonging to a large black pigeon, presumably either *Columba pallidiceps* or *Ducula melanochroa*.

*Lorius hypoinochrous*. Purple-bellied Lory. This lory was commonly seen in the forest canopy and flying over the camps; it usually occurred in pairs. The local name of "Malip" was also in use at Talasea; Dahl (1899) recorded it as "Mallip" at Ralum.

*Cacatua ophthalmica*. Blue-eyed Cockatoo. I saw or heard several pairs in the forest. In life the crest of this species is appressed to the back of the head, so that the yellow plumes are difficult to see. I never saw the crest raised, even during calling (see

also Heinroth 1902). The calls of this cockatoo are considerably higher-pitched, less raspy and more nasal than those of the Sulphur-Crested Cockatoo (*C. galerita*). Among the calls noted were a measured series of screams (dropping slightly in pitch at the end of each, and given while perched) and a rapid series of upsturred, rather gull-like calls given in flight. The differences in calls and in crest shape appear to support the separation of *C. ophthalmica* from *C. galerita* at the specific level as done by Forshaw (1973). These birds were conspicuous from the helicopter during the return flight to Kimbe. The native name of "Koki" (presumably pidgin rather than Nakanai) was also in use at Talasea.

*Geoffroyus heteroclitus*. Singing Parrot. I saw one male perched in a dead tree in the forest along the trail on the morning of 2 November, calling a raucous "kyeer-kyeer-kyeer. . ." This was reminiscent of the calls of the Red-cheeked Parrot (*G. geoffroyi*) on New Guinea, but delivered much more rapidly. This bird was unknown to the local people both here and at Talasea, where I failed to find it; A. F. Eichhorn found it "common" there five decades ago (Hartert 1926). Dahl (1899) said it was rare at Ralum in the 1890's, and Gilliard (Gilliard and LeCroy 1967:197) found it "very uncommon" in the Whiteman Mountains.

*Cacomantis variolosus*. Brush Cuckoo. I heard one bird calling at Lae Camp on the morning of 2 November. The calls sounded just like those I heard in New Guinea and Australia.

*Centropus violaceus*. Violet Coucal. Four or five birds were heard at scattered intervals through the

forest. This is a secretive species of the lower canopy. The call is a rich, resonant and particularly loud and deep plopping sound, preceded by a softer introductory note ("woo . . . woo-woop"). This is apparently the call Diamond (1972a) recorded as a duet, with the second "woo" note given by a different bird. The local name was "Mukmuk" (onomatopoeic); it was called "Komuk" at Talasea and "Kumkum" at Garu (Miniotas and Lindgren 1972). Dahl (1899) recorded a similar name—"Kamuk"—at Rahum for *C. ateralbus*.

*Centropus ateralbus*. White-necked Coucal. Common in the forest. A group of three birds appeared to be resident near the clearing at Lae Camp. Its call is a rhythmic series of hoots ranging in tone from a squeak to a quite deep note (although never as deep or as resonant as that of *C. violaceus*). The tail was held slightly above the horizontal during calling and was switched from side to side with each hoot. Less often, I heard a series of low, liquid "oom" notes, alternating between a lower and higher pitch with no break between; this call was apparently given in duet, but I did not hear the entire duetting sequence as described by Diamond (1972a). Most birds seen were in the lower canopy layers, though I did flush one bird from the undergrowth, whereupon it hopped up into the canopy. At Talasea and Rabaul this species was observed in shrubby second growth, whereas *C. violaceus* was found only in tall forest.

Hartert (1926) recorded a considerable range of color in A. F. Eichhorn's series of this species from Talasea, from the typical black with white throat, broad collar and wing shoulders, to an almost cream shade. However, of the approximately 25 coucals I saw on New Britain at Talasea, Plesyumi and Rabaul, all except three were in the typical plumage; a single bird at Plesyumi appeared to be more brownish than black, and two birds at Keravat on the Gazelle Peninsula had the black of the head reduced to a coronal stripe and a patch above the eye. This suggests either that A. F. Eichhorn may have concentrated on plumage variants that are actually rare, or that his series, collected from January through March, represents age differences not apparent in November (although Heinroth [1902] recorded nestlings during both periods). Pale variant plumages have been recorded in other dark coucals, either as aberrations (*C. goliath*), as a more or less common morph (*C. sinensis kangeanensis*), or as a possible eclipse plumage resembling the juvenile (*C. bengalensis*; Hoogerwerf 1964). Presumably any of these conditions could apply in *C. ateralbus*.

*Hemiprocne mystacea*. Moustached Tree Swift. A few birds were in the vicinity of Lae Camp. Two calls were noted: a sharp, descending "peeu" usually given when perched, and a series of (normally) four ascending nasal squeaks given in flight.

*Aceros plicatus*. Blyth's Hornbill. This hornbill was common in the forest. Pairs, single birds or groups of three were often seen flying down the Lae River gorge, particularly at dusk. The call of this species is a loud, rough "wuk-wuk-wuk. . . ." The wings in flight make a sound like tearing cardboard. The local name was "Kokomo" (in use throughout Papua New Guinea).

*Coracina papuensis*. Papuan Cuckoo-shrike. I saw one bird flying over Lae Camp on 3 November, calling a squeaky "jwika" similar to that of the Australian races of this species.

*Ortygocichla rubiginosa*. Rusty Thicket Warbler. One pair was seen in the forest at Lae Camp on the morning of 3 November, calling until about 06:15. The birds hopped along the forest floor, keeping largely out of sight under ferns and thick undergrowth. They stayed about 10–20 m apart, keeping in contact with loud, dry staccato trills, occasionally leading into a sharp chattering call. They allowed me to approach closely but were difficult to see, keeping to the ground and fallen logs under cover. They responded to squeaking, however, and one finally approached to within about 1 m. In appearance and behavior it strongly reminded me of the Pilotbird (*Pycnoptilus floccosus*) of Australia; the most striking difference is the long, graduated tail, which is held cocked at a sharp angle like that of a grasswren (*Amytornis*) but fanned.

*Rhipidura dahl*. Dahl's Fantail. One seen in the low canopy and substage of the forest along the trail on 2 November, associating in a mixed party with *Monarcha verticalis* and *Pachycephala pectoralis*. This species is like a dull Rufous Fantail (*R. rufifrons*) in appearance; its song is quite similar, a squeaky, insect-like "swit-tooteetootooowit," rising in pitch on the last syllable.

*Rhipidura rufiventris*. Large-billed Fantail. I saw a pair in the forest along the trail on 2 November, associating with *Myzomela cineracea*; another pair was in the forest at Lae Camp on 3 November, associating with *Piezorhynchus hebetior* and *Pachycephala pectoralis*. The song of this bird, which is extremely similar to that given in New Guinea, was heard from camp both mornings; it is a series of three or four liquid notes in a descending scale, followed by a jumble of whistled notes. The call is a sharp "tsik" similar to the note of a flowerpecker (*Dicaeum* sp.).

*Piezorhynchus hebetior*. Little Shining Flycatcher. One female was associating with *Rhipidura rufiventris* and *Pachycephala pectoralis* in the forest at Lae Camp on 3 November. It resembled a Shining Flycatcher (*P. alecto*), but appeared more compact and notably large-headed. In typical posture it held its body and tail horizontally and the head erect. Unlike *P. alecto*, which spends much of its time foraging on roots and buttresses (pers. observ.), this bird appeared to restrict its foraging to the lower canopy layers and did not confine its attention to trunks and larger limbs.

*Monarcha verticalis*. Black-and-white Monarch. I saw one pair at Lae Camp, and another along the trail associating with *Rhipidura rufiventris* and *Pachycephala pectoralis* on 2 November. This was a quiet, unobtrusive bird foraging among vines and epiphytes, usually near the trunk.

*Dicaeum eximium*. Bismarck Flowerpecker. This was common in the camp areas, and presumably so throughout the forest although it is a canopy species and difficult to locate except at edge situations. One appeared to be associating with the mixed flock containing *Rhipidura dahl*.

*Aplonis metallicus*. Shining Starling. I saw a few birds, probably of this species, making sallying flights from a tree atop the ridge west of Lae Camp on 2 November. Making similar flights from the same tree were a Dollarbird (*Eurystomus orientalis*), New Britain Friarbirds (*Philemon cockerelli*), Papuan Mynahs (*Mino dumonti*), and Spangled Drongos (*Dicrurus hottentottus*). All the birds were apparently flycatching; Rand (1942) recorded Shining Starlings feeding in this fashion on large flying ants

which were swarming in New Guinea. However, this behavior has not previously been recorded for the Papuan Mynah, which has been regarded as completely frugivorous (Dahl 1899, Heinroth 1903, Rand 1942).

*Dicurus hottentottus*. Spangled Drongo. A few pairs were seen at scattered locations in the forest.

*Corvus orru*. Australian Crow. At least one pair was seen at each camp. This race (*C. o. insularis*) appears short-tailed in flight compared to other races in New Guinea and Australia, and has a different call—a short “wruk . . . wruk-wruk . . .” Heinroth (1903) and Dahl (1899) record a local name, “Kottkott,” based on this two-syllabled call. A captive of Heinroth’s (1903:70) also delivered “a very droll song—“krah, krah, kroaaa”—with an altogether comical sound to the prolonged last syllable” (translated from German). This seems similar to calls given by other Australian corvids. The distinctiveness of this race was first pointed out to me by L. W. Filewood.

## DISCUSSION

In addition, I observed the following species in the Plesyumi area: *Nycticorax caledonicus*, Nankeen Night Heron; *Haliaeetus leucogaster*, White-bellied Sea Eagle; *Megapodius freycinet*, Scrubfowl; *Trichoglossus haematodus*, Rainbow Lorikeet; *Charmosyna placensis*, Red-flanked Lorikeet; *Eclectus roratus*, Eclectus Parrot (local name of “Kalangan” was also used at Talasea; recorded by Dahl (1899) at Ralum as “Kallenger”); *Eudynamis scolopacea*, Koel; *Eurystomus orientalis*, Dollarbird; *Lalage leucomela*, Varied Triller; *Pachycephala pectoralis*, Golden Whistler; *Myzomela cineracea*, Cinereous Honeyeater; *Philemon cockerelli*, New Britain Friarbird (local name of “Kow” also in use at Talasea; recorded by Dahl (1899) at Ralum as “Kau”).

This list, though not exhaustive, appears to characterize the avifauna of the Plesyumi area as typical of lowland forest on New Britain; this is indicated by the presence of *Charmosyna placensis* rather than *C. rubrigularis*, as well as of other lowland species such as *Geoffroyus heteroclitus* and *Ortygocichla rubiginosa* (Gilliard and LeCroy 1967). The only species recorded that Gilliard considered to be a bird of higher elevations was *Rhipidura dahli*; this species coexists with *R. rufiventris*. However, A. F. Eichhorn collected *R. dahli* at Talasea (Hartert 1926) and A. Layton (pers. comm.) has seen it at sea level.

Passerines in the sub-canopy were scarce. Except for *Ortygocichla rubiginosa* and a few unidentified birds, the only such were seen in mixed foraging flocks at wide intervals in the forest. These assemblages consisted of only two or three species and but a few individuals

of each. The three flocks encountered had the following composition: (a) 1 *Rhipidura dahli*, 2 *Monarcha verticalis*, 1 male *Pachycephala pectoralis*, and possibly 1 *Dicaeum eximium*; (b) 2 *R. rufiventris* and 1 *Myzomela cineracea*; (c) 2 *R. rufiventris*, 1 female *Piezorhynchus hebetior*, and 2 female *Pachycephala pectoralis*. The retention of mixed flocking behavior in so reduced an avifauna as that of New Britain contrasts with the situation in the rain forest of the Atherton Tableland of northern Queensland. Here, in the course of repeated observations during January, February, March and November 1973 at Crater and Lake Eacham National Parks, as well as more limited observations in other areas, I did not find such activity to be strongly marked. The fauna of the northern Queensland rain forests, like that of New Britain, is depauperate with Papuan affinities (Frith 1973). However, Diamond (1972b) found that flocking varied considerably among different areas of New Guinea, and Fogden (1972) found that such behavior was seasonably variable in Sarawak.

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