

## Remote PNG, 23/6 - 17/7/2008

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SMRY had been planning a trip to see Fire-maned Bowerbird almost as long as I'd known him, even before I was a birder. With some justification it had become for him the birding zenith, a target prized above all others, not unlike the status afforded Satyr Tragopan by Mark Cocker in his book *Birders*. I still remember a mad plan Steve had hatched when we were living in Kingston Rd, Oxford as PhD students, to get himself and fellow Imperial College birder Ed Smith on a sponsored twitch whose climax would be FMBB. Of course it never happened.

However after a couple of short but very enjoyable foreign birding trips with him to Spain in the late 90s and early 00s we began talking about me as part of the equation, and in 2003 we even paid a deposit to Phil Gregory to guide us for part of a trip which we would self-organise. This fell through when Phil turned out to be available only in a small window and the remaining logistics became overwhelming, not to mention the fact that both Steve and I each had a 3 year old at home with another on the way.

A couple of years later we again came close. With a slightly reconfigured group I made a firm commitment at the end of 2004 to a '05 trip, but this was cancelled when disagreement about the logistics arose in the group even at the planning stage.

More years passed when in Nov 2007 I wrote, somewhat in passing to Steve, that it was unlikely to happen in '08 either. I nearly spat my cup of tea on the computer screen when his response 24 hours later had the subject line "UH OH" and opening line "Brace Yourself!" The contents basically said that he reserved the last two available places on Birdquest's Remote PNG tour for the following year and that he was already deeply committed and paid up. I had 48 hours to decide if I was to join him. The trip itinerary climaxed with a visit to the fabled Keki Lodge. It would be Birdquest's first ever visit there, and more importantly, it is almost the only place on earth where FMBB can be seen. A visit to the Huon peninsular, bird-filled and rarely visited was also mouth-watering, but a week on New Ireland would not have figured in any self-designed itinerary. Great birding, no doubt, but not what I envisaged when watching so many Attenborough films about Birds of Paradise and Bowerbirds. On the plus side, the timing could hardly have been better for getting domestic clearance: not an examination year for me, outside university terms, and no clash with school (and hence family) hols.

I talked to Birdquest, thought about it for my 2 days grace period and then, despite not wanting to let Steve down, said "no". For the next fortnight I stewed on this decision, thinking about the timing and how gripped off I would be when Steve returned... and whether I would ever get another shot in my life to go to some of these particularly remote locations. After two weeks of this I knew I'd made the wrong decision. Fortunately BQ still had the place, and suddenly I was going on a long,

completely hard-core birding trip to some of the most exotic and least visited places on earth. Wow! I wrote immediately to Steve: "Deposit sent, acknowledgement received. Mouth-watering, and not just for the birds, for the sheer adventure of it. It's the *right* decision!"

23/6

Steve and I rendezvoused at the check-in desk at Heathrow where we also met fellow trip participant Chris Furlepa, a veteran of many organised birding tours including several Birdquest trips. His most recent two had been to the Solomons and West Papua with Mark van Beirs who would be leading our Remote PNG trip also. As a recently retired GP he was presumably well set financially, and reasoned to himself very sensibly that doing tough trips sooner while still fairly physically fit rather than later was his best option. After buying some US dollars for incidental expenses during the trip (i.e. beer) Steve and I adjourned to the lounge for a few bevies. Amazingly as we looked up the TV screen playing various adverts, suddenly an advert for Friends Reunited Dating featuring a displaying Parotia came on. We hoped this was a sign.

On the plane I met Mark van Beirs, the tour leader and one of the world's top listers with (at the time) just under 8000 species to his name worldwide. Sat next to me for the flight was Billy Rodger, who introduced himself as a fellow participant once I had settled in. He was also an experienced world birder, on this trip seeking his 22<sup>nd</sup> pitta species. Completing the group of six, sat next to Steve, was Helmut Brunner-Schenkel, a retired Austrian academic whose round face and thick glasses conjured a resemblance to Mr Magoo in my twisted mind.

My regular haunt on long-hauls via Changi Airport in Singapore has been the transit hotel pool. It's a great place to relax and freshen up between flights and despite this I have never seen it busy. I came equipped with bathers but was disappointed to realise that we had to leave the transit area to collect our luggage and recheck it because our connection changed carrier from Singapore Airlines, one of the best, to Air Niugini, (as we were to discover to our cost) one of the worst. The Air Niugini check-in desk was not ready for us just yet, so after a wait of a couple of hours we went back to the desk and were now told that there would be a further delay. More time went by and eventually we were informed that the flight had been "retimed" to the next morning, an expression we would come to dread by the end of the month. Our first day's birding that had been scheduled in the famed Varirata National Park near Port Moresby had just been completely shafted. We now endured another couple of hours excruciating wait until finally we were taken by bus to the hotel that Air Niugini had arranged.

The "Hotel 81" that AN had chosen for us was cheap. It was also rather nasty. As the buses pulled up alongside a line of scantily clad girls, all legs and cleavage, it was pretty clear we had arrived in the red light district and that our hotel's rooms were available by the hour. An unseemly scum developed at the hotel desk, as 150 or so tired and pissed off AN passengers battled to get keys to a room. I managed to get to the front and secured keys to a room for me and Steve. "Two people?", "Yes", "OK", "Two beds", "No..." Oh shit! Even as I took the keys I was displaced back several deep into the crowd and couldn't bear the thought of battling back to exchange for a twin room. I was not even sure the Hotel 81 had such a thing. Standing next to the double bed we were to share, we

looked out on the view of the swelling ranks of talent for sale, and Steve muttered, tongue-in-cheek, “conditions will never be more ripe for a spit roast, Reido”.

We did take a stroll around the neighbourhood, breathing in the mix of spicy, sweet, sticky and rancid smells of South-East Asia hanging in the thick, hot evening air, but with 13 hours flight and another 6 hours waiting around in our systems it was not long before we were back in the hotel. As I lay on my side of the bed, I started to leaf through the field guide for some last-minute swatting, but was out-cold within minutes while Steve was still brushing his teeth. In spite of the proximity of my sweaty, snoring body, I suspect Steve managed some decent sleep as well.

24/6

We woke to the news that our departure had been put back a further two hours and that breakfast – a McDonald’s happy meal – would be delivered to our rooms. Deeply frustrated at the continuing delay, excited at being so far from home, and anxious to start birding, Steve and I took a stroll to a small park south of the hotel where we noted our first birds of the trip: **White-vented Myna** (most of the Mynas in Singapore are this introduced species, not the native Common Myna), **House Crow**, **Black-naped Oriole**, **Yellow-vented Bulbul**, **Olive-backed Sunbird**, **Common Iora**, **Forest Kingfisher** and **Common Koel**. We returned to the hotel where finally it was time to get going back to Changi.

Singapore to Port Moresby is still another 5 hours flying time, and you lose two hours in time zones, so by the time we finally arrived in the infamous Jacksons Airport it was already dark. We then spent another hour sat around in the airport while Mark and local guide Daniel rearranged our flights for the next day and sorted out hotel accommodation. Having heard so much about the crime rate in Port Moresby, we were suspicious everywhere we looked on exiting the airport, and held on to our 1000s pounds worth of optics very tightly. I surveyed the various people milling around with an irrational degree of suspicion, which then turned to horror as the first three people I looked at apparently had terrible bleeding gums. What terrifying third-world affliction was this? Thus, my first impressions of PNG, as for so many before me, were dominated by the effects of betelnut chewing.

25/6

The Hideaway Hotel, booked for us by Daniel at short notice was clean enough and provided a decent meal, though before it was light we were heading back to Port Moresby airport for a flight to Alotau. Birding started while we clearing security inside the airport: we were taken aback to see what was clearly a buff/brown bird in the hands of one of the security guys as we passed into the departure lounge. Totally out of context it took some close scrutiny to realise he was holding an **Australian Pratincole**. He had caught it that morning, and Mark told us he would probably take it



home as a pet. Steve, thinking much faster than me, realised that it was doomed to die in his “care”, and equally quickly came up with a way to give it freedom: US\$5 and it belonged to him, his first act as owner being to set it free near the runway. Another of this cracking species was seen on the runway, and indeed every time we took off or landed at Port Moresby airport (10 times in all over the month) we were on the lookout for these elegant waders, wondering

each time if it was “Steve’s bird” we were looking at.

As the plane descended towards touch down at Gurney Airport we had our first aerial views of what would become a familiar depressing sight: swathes of oil palm monoculture almost as far as the eye could see along the coast. **Singing Starling** was common at the airport and our transfer, without drama was to the beautiful Napatana Lodge on the shore of Milne Bay. The communal area upstairs around a bar provided a good viewing platform into the gardens, so while MvB did some organisational work, we sheltered from the rain and picked up a nice selection of New Guinea birds, including **Forest Kingfisher**, **Scrub white-eared Meliphaga** (I can hear the gasps of all the birders gripped off as they read this... not), **Black Sunbird**, **Olive-backed Sunbird**, **Chestnut-breasted Munia**, **New Guinea Friarbird**, **Grey-tailed Tattler** on the water’s edge, and top bird here, **Fawn-breasted Bowerbird**, a fairly non-descript large brown bird, but my first of this iconic family, only found in New Guinea and Australia.



Because of our lost day we thought this was a temporary stop and were primed to transfer immediately to boats en route to the d’Entrecasteux islands of Normanby and Fergusson. These islands are home to two endemic and rarely seen Birds of Paradise: Goldies BoP, a close relative of the Raggiana with a beautiful mauve breast, and Crinkled-collared Manucode, the funkiest looking of this otherwise drab sub-family of BoPs. However Mark returned with some bad news: we would be unable to cross to Normanby. There was a weather

warning for small vessels in the Goshen Strait and our skipper was reluctant to go out. Fortunately Mark had been able to book us into the lodge for the night, and we settled in to a delightful detached unit with thatched roof while Mark did some further organising to sort out some birding for us for the afternoon. After more delays, a minibus arrived and took us to an oil palm plantation west of Alotau called Gili-Gili. Above the plantation we birded along a trail in secondary forest and enjoyed an excellent, birdy afternoon. Almost immediately we heard the cries of Raggiana BoP getting the hearts racing, but we could not locate the owner of voice. As we were drawn up the slopes a good selection of NG birds revealed themselves, including great views of male and female **Eclectus Parrot**, ultimately one of the commonest birds of the trip, **Sulphur-crested Cockatoo** (another ubiquitous taxon), **Red-cheeked Parrot**, **Eastern Black-capped Lory**, **Wompoo Fruit-Dove** and **Orange-bellied Fruit-Dove**, a tremendous **Yellow-billed Kingfisher** called in with Mark’s iPod. It was too dark for decent photography but some passable video made up for this. A nice mixed feeding flock of Monarchs held **Black-faced**, **Frilled**, and a stupendous **Golden Monarch**, before we finally tracked down the BoPs. As we arrived there seemed to be three or four birds and I had

glimpses of long tail feathers but never saw a whole bird, and then almost as soon as we had arrived, they buggered off – funny that. Fortunately a young male was rather less skittish and we tracked him down and managed some decent digiscoped pictures of **Raggiana Bird of Paradise**. On the descent a haunting, warbling whistle close to the track was identified by Mark as Red-bellied Pitta, a sound that was to frustrate me no end over the coming weeks. We sat tight on the track in the hope that Mark's iPod could entice it out but gradually it moved further away. Privately afterwards, Billy, Pitta-man, commented that he held no hope for that technique and was surprised we hadn't dived into the forest. As it got darker, Mark tried a few times for Hook-billed Kingfisher without success.



In spite of these late afternoon dips, it had been a very birdy time. My only previous experience of tropical birding was two days at REGUA in SE Brazil which had been similarly bird-filled, and so I still had no idea how unforgiving and hard work the rainforest can be.

Back at the lodge we showered and while Steve immediately set to work on his journal – a feature of every night of the trip until we ended up in a place where he couldn't charge his battery – I chewed the fat with Otto, the skipper over a few beers. It was no consolation to find out from him that the bad weather in the straits is fully expected at this time of year because, while the rest of the country has its “drier” season this part of New Guinea gets its weather from the Coral Sea. Over dinner there was yet more bad news. The weather warning had been extended and not even the ferry would be operating to Normanby. It rained heavily all night.

26/6

Once again Mark did his best to make alternative arrangements. Some lowland rainforest at a place called Haluwiya seemed promising, perhaps even holding King Bird of Paradise, and we were up pre-dawn to make sure we were there for dawn to maximise quality birding time. Sadly we now had another of depressingly regular bouts of TIPNG (“This is Papua New Guinea”): the rumour was that there was an issue with the road to the east, where the heavy overnight rain had washed away part of a ford across one of the many rivers.

We birded the Napatana Lodge gardens some more while we waited for further news on the road, noting **Eastern Black-capped Lory**, **Red-cheeked Parrot**, **Pacific Swallow**, **New Guinea Friarbird**, poor but tickable **Brown-backed Honeyeater**, juv **Rufous-backed Honeyeater**, **Black Sunbird** and **Yellow-bellied (Olive-backed) Sunbird** and **White-breasted Woodswallow**.

Eventually, much later than we'd hoped, we were heading east until we reached the problematic river. The concrete ramp on the approach to the ford had collapsed at the corner, but with care we were able to cross. We carried on the several more km east to Haluwiya with the rain barely abating.

We were grateful to find a huge **Palm Cockatoo** soon after arriving, also **Azure Kingfisher** and **White-winged Fairywren**, and we then set out on a long, almost completely birdless walk through lovely looking but very wet forest. Almost immediately we had to cross over a river to a track on the far bank. We removed boots and socks and waded carefully across in the thigh deep water, dried off and put our footwear back on. 50m later the path crossed the river again. "One more crossing after this one", the locals said. But it seemed what they meant was actually "more", not "one more". In all we crossed the same river about 7-8 times. Steve and I gave up on the footwear after the third crossing, going barefoot like the locals until we finally struck out uphill away from the river. Here a Variable Dwarf Kingfisher zipped by, called by Mark, but travelling too fast for me to get anything on it to consider it tickable. It was to be the only bird of the next 3 hours. We trudged up a steep muddy path with occasional rains



showers, eventually reaching a ridge where the rain started to come down in earnest. As I fruitlessly tried to wipe rain off my bins with a damp cloth I learnt the valuable lesson that in future I should carry the lens cloths in a water-tight plastic bag.

We carried on this ridge, skirting around the settlement and then descending to the road. Finally the rain abated somewhat and in this more disturbed area we started to see some birds. First up both **Orange-fronted** and

**Orange-bellied Fruit-Dove**, then back at the settlement we spent an hour or more scanning the hillside inspecting the scrub nearby. Highlights included **Blyth's Hornbill** (flying and then scoped perched) and **Glossy-mantled Manucode**, views of this drab BoP distant but gratifying nonetheless, and our only one of the month. I found a **Pheasant Coucal** which I was quite pleased about, but it turned out that while I was watching that, the others had been grilling a White-bellied Thicket-Fantail, a much harder skulker of dense scrub; "a really good one to get", somewhat patronisingly pointed out by Kris. I hoped I wouldn't regret this error of judgement. A **White-winged Fairywren** of the northern black race posed nicely for photographs, and we also noted a flyover **Lesser Frigatebird**, **Mimic Meliphaga**, **Red-capped Flowerpecker**, **Singing** and **Metallic Starlings**, **Shining Flycatcher** and **Spangled Drongo**.

The news in the evening was still not good as far as conditions in the channel were concerned. The ferry would be running again, but there was still a weather warning for small craft. We were now

seriously cutting it fine if we were to make it to Fergusson for our first two target species. Retrospect is a wonderful thing, but perhaps what we should have done is take the ferry as far as Normanby and find a banana boat to cross the channel between Normanby and Fergusson.

27/6

Yet again this morning our pre-dawn rise was in vain as we waited around for our transport. A small party of **Moustached Treeswifts** that I picked up coming overhead somewhat made up for the frustration of missing out on the best birding hours because TIPNG, and still at Napatana we also added **Red-flanked Lorikeet**. Today we headed east to the North Coast Rd, an area of open savannah, that gradually gave way to denser forest over the 3km or so that we covered, mostly on foot. The birding was slow and steady and by the time we piled into the minibus to go back to Napatana we had collected a decent array of birds.

One of the first birds of the day was a **White-bellied Thicket Fantail**, which I was glad to claw back having missed the one at Haluwiya. Mark's iPod tempted a small family party to come from dense cover into just slightly less dense scrub where I got tickable glimpses of one, and saw the movement of two others. The day carried on quite well with nice views of a **Rainbow Bee-eater**, then pair of **Pacific Baza**, a species I had admired in Australian field guides for many years, as well as several **Brahminy Kites** including one that posed beautifully for digiscoped shots. Mark called a **Papuan Hanging Parrot** as it flew off and all I saw was a tiny squat torpedo body and a whirr of wings.

Also new today were **Pink-spotted Fruit-Dove**, **Shining Bronze-Cuckoo**, an Australasian species and one of the few non-lifers for me, **Common Cicadabird**, **Black-shouldered Cuckoo-Shrike**, and **Little and Grey Shrike Thrushes**.

The day heated up but we carried on walking towards the top of the pass from where the road descends down to the north coast of the peninsula. As we approached the top, with Steve and I ahead of the others a small group of **Raggiana BoP** was heard calling and finally we had decent, albeit brief views of an adult male resplendent with amazing tail. Sadly again the skittishness of these much-hunted birds was apparent as they almost immediately disappeared to more distant trees, out of sight.

As we descended we scanned across the forest towards the sea and picked up some soaring raptors one which was an excellent **Gurney's Eagle**. The call of another Red-bellied Pitta below us in dense scrub had us lining up on the road, peering down a steep gully in silence as Mark tried to bring it closer. It responded to the tape for a while at some range then went silent. Suddenly Chris, standing almost next to me whispered "I've got it – on the log". As I raised my bins to focus on a fallen branch at the bottom of the gully an untickable shape flitted left and out of sight forever. Chris was the only one of the 6 of us to get on it.

28/6

For our final morning in Alotau we headed back to Gili-gili. Mark had insisted to the drivers that they be ready pre-dawn so that we could take advantage of the best hours, and for the first time we were on our way in good time. As the first rays crept above the eastern horizon we arrived at the entrance to the oil palm plantation, familiar from a few days ago.

But yet again we were to be shafted by TIPNG misfortune. The owners of the plantation had decided that we would not be allowed back. We never did find out why, but instead turned around, and headed desolately in completely the opposite direction, east the 45mins or so back to the North Coast Rd, all the while my stomach churning with deep frustration and bitter disappointment that it seemed nothing would go right for us. Was this turning into the trip from hell?

Back at the North Coast Rd, we did enjoy some decent birding, picking up a number of species not seen yesterday, including **Varied Triller**, **Black Cuckoo-Shrike**, **Streak-headed** and **Puff-backed Meliphaga**. **Dusky Myzomela** brought an ironic smile to the face since it was this species that Steve had picked out as the least inspiring lifer available on the trip, the very antithesis of the reason we were spending all this time and money. Of course for the listers, a tick's a tick, and they all count the same.

A **Brahminy Kite** shared a branch with a pair of **Eastern Black-capped Lory**, while new doves were **Coronated Fruit-Dove**, and a self-find, **Superb Fruit-Dove**. Higher up the road the call of a **Rufous-bellied Kookaburra** was tantalising but it seemed we were doomed to dip as it stayed behind a dense wall of foliage until amazingly one of our local guides managed to pick it out with his naked eyes through the narrowest of windows.

Mixing walking with covering a few km in the minibus we made it to the top of the pass again. Here we found a young male **Raggiana Bird of Paradise** "anting" itself, repeatedly picking an ant from the tree branch and rubbing its feathers with the formaldehyde secreted by the insect. We descended a short way beyond the top of the pass hoping to relocate the BoPs, but we were unsuccessful. A pair of **Grey-headed Goshawk** was a fantastic addition, but in spite of hearing the calls of some displaying Raggiana BoPs we had no further views. Additional raptor interest was provided by a **Long-tailed Buzzard** that flew over our heads at the "Gurney's lookout".

Back at Napatana we picked up a final tick, **Green-backed Honey-eater**, before heading back to Gurney Airport (where we had **Pacific Golden Plover** and **Pied Chat**) for the late afternoon flight to Port Moresby. The Gateway Hotel was our up-market resting place for the night and we took the opportunity to do some hand-washing of clothes in the sink.

29/6

While we grabbed a few zzz's with a rare lie in, Chris was up and about, finding the trip's only Yellow-tinted Honey-eater in the hotel garden, but straight after breakfast we were back at Jacksons Airport to check in for our flight to Kavieng on New Ireland. Once again our flight was "retimed", this time by some three hours, so Mark and Daniel rapidly arranged transport and we headed out to an area of eucalypt savannah near the Taumura military training base off the Spring Garden Rd. A fabulous **Blue-winged Kookaburra** made the trip worthwhile, and we also found **Nankeen Night-heron** and **Golden-headed Cisticola**. A **Black-backed Butcherbird**, the only one of the trip, gave us the run-around but yielded tickable views just in time, before we returned to the domestic terminal where – after yet another delay – finally our flight was ready to leave. Our destination was Kavieng, the capital of New Ireland, at the northern tip of this exotic island, but the flight first went via Manus (which we were to visit later in the trip anyway). As we came in to land a storm was brewing and by the time passengers had disembarked and new ones bound for Kavieng boarded, the rain was torrential. Although the pilot taxied to the end of the runway in preparation, he aborted as the rain



was too heavy and conditions too dangerous. Another 30 minute delay ensued as we waited for the rain to abate. Finally we got airborne and an hour or so later we started the descent to Kavieng.

New Ireland holds 8 endemics of its own and shares a further 14 “Bismark” endemics with neighbouring New Britain. No doubt this is an interesting birding destination, exotic and rarely visited, but after our disastrous start to the tour, in one of my lower moments I had even started to plot leaving the group during the New Ireland leg and heading up to the highlands alone. Rightly Steve persuaded me of the folly of this, for all sorts of reasons.

Because of the various delays, our flight had arrived too late for us to make the journey south to our accommodation, so we checked into a Kavieng hotel. Our hotel – there appeared to be only two in Kavieng – gave the appearance of being the more downmarket of the two. Mark assured us that this was deliberate, because this one, unlike the other, was rather more birder friendly and we could have breakfast very early.

Outside the hotel we found an **Osprey** on a comms tower and then even better, an **Oriental Hobby**, before driving back to the airfield to look for our first endemic. From late afternoon until dusk we birded from the road looking east across an area of reeds and long grass towards the airstrip. A **Buff-banded Rail** showed distantly, adding to one we had seen earlier while waiting to collect our bags after the flight from Port Moresby, and an **Australian Reed Warbler** showed briefly and was new for the trip.

Within minutes we had picked up several **Hunstein’s Munia** buzzing around in the long grass and it was especially satisfying finally to connect with one of the trip specialties. Maybe, we sensed, our luck had turned. They were surprisingly smart birds too: all black body, chestnut rump and tail, and a silver crown extending down to the nape and a distinctive silver base to the lower mandible. We had excellent views, though finding one that would stay still on the same reed-stem for long enough to digiscope was a challenge. By the time we left we had counted over a hundred in the roosting flock. One bird showed markedly different plumage – chocolate brown head and pale buff breast with streaks neatly demarcated from the head, and brown back and wings -- and posed something of a quandary. Perhaps it was a juvenile – though having noted both **Bismark** and **New Ireland Munias** a few days later we would return to this bird and wonder in retrospect if we’d had a New Ireland in the flock of Hunstein’s.



Also of interest here was a large “raptor” I picked up flying across. Mark urged us to look closer, and as we did, Steve exclaimed that it was in fact a huge fruit-bat.

30/6

A very early hearty breakfast saw us ready to hit the Boluminsky Highway while it was still dark in order to get to our destination 3 hours south. Almost the first bird of the journey, once it was light enough to see anything, was a **Yellow-tinted Imperial Pigeon** that flew across the road in front of the car. This large attractive pigeon is one of the endemics and interestingly this was to be our only

sighting. We stopped at a beautiful lagoon to take advantage of the dawn activity. A dark morph **Eastern Reef Egret** was fishing in the mangroves, and then I spied another heron-like bird flap across a gap and go behind thick mangroves. It reappeared stalking low, horizontally poised in the mangroves and then in some stunted reeds. Mark called **Black Bittern** as it disappeared from view, though at this stage I had still not seen enough for a satisfactory self-identification. After a frustrating few minutes Chris picked it up again and I locked on to a decent though partially obscured view of it munching a crab it had just caught. A **Nicobar Pigeon** gave flight views sufficient to clock its curiously proportioned profile: long neck and stunted white tail. This is a star bird, but since we were hoping for much better views in a few days' time, we didn't stress too much that we'd only had flight views. Other birds noted here were **Common Kingfisher**, **Lesser Shining Flycatcher**, and both male and female **Shining Flycatcher** which look very different from one another. The male is a deep glossy blue/black while the female is rufous.

We arrived at the very basic but utterly idyllic Dalom Guest House, situated on the beach at the mouth of a pristine rainforest stream, while it was still fairly early morning and after setting mosquito nets in the simple rooms we headed out in the 4x4s on the very rough track up to the Lelet Plateau.



We had only stopped once for birding, including Steve grabbing some excellent pics of a pair of perched **Moustached Treeswifts**, and were just setting up to digiscope some **Long-tailed Mynas** when a truck with about 15 blokes came from the other direction. It stopped and the occupants piled out, every one of them sporting beetelnut red-stained teeth and gums and wielding a 2-foot machete causing an instant feeling of unease. I tried to persuade myself that they were just here to cut bamboo, and they seemed friendly enough, at least at first. Then a sour-faced younger looking one (we found out later called "Gursin") emerged from the mob. We ushered Mark forwards; surely it would just be a matter of him explaining we had permission, and as the experienced world birder and tour leader, he would know how to deal with this. This initial confidence waned as Gursin repeated aggressively that we were not welcome, and that we had no right to take pictures of birds on his land, all the while slashing absently at the long grass with his machete. His eyes were glazed and it seemed pretty clear he was on something, perhaps drunk or maybe an OD of beetelnut.

We had brought two of the local village girls with us as our "proof" that we had permission (no one more senior from Dalom was available in the morning), and Mark decided the best thing to do was to take him down to the vans where the girls were waiting and hope that they would be able to

explain in his own language that we had permission. As we waited very nervously with the remaining henchmen, Mark walked down the track. To try and ease the tension I offered my eyepiece to one of them to look at the Myna. He did, and enjoyed the view, but we all remained in a state of anxiety. After what felt like an age, Mark returned and without saying anything else just told us to get back to the vans quickly. We had to leave right now. It emerged later in the trip that Mark has never been so uncomfortable in all his world travels.

Relieved to be back at the guest house, and for once in no hurry to get back to birding, we gazed out across the turquoise Pacific. A pod of Indo-pacific Dolphins played, and then the amazing sight of a "Swordfish" breaching" several times helped calm the nerves a bit. As Steve and I privately debated our discomfort at returning to the Lelet Plateau, and the risk of doing so for birds that were not high on either personal priority lists, Mark was apparently making arrangements to get back up there. Over lunch he persuaded us that it was ok to return. Willy, the local chief, was now back in the village and available to be our chaperone. As the son of Willy's mate, Gursin would not dare try anything on.

Now back in the area we had abandoned in haste, the bamboo party truck was still present but there was no sign of Gursin. We drove beyond to a higher spot, where the birding was slow but steady. Chris located an endemic **Pied Coucal** almost as soon as we arrived back, and I found another in flight a little later. Pigeons and doves were to the fore with **Slender-billed**, **Black-billed** and **Pied Cuckoo-dove** all seen. The latter gave excellent views of its rollercoaster display flight when it responded to Mark's iPod. A green dove shooting low across the track was probably a **Stefan's Ground Dove** and we discovered that this was a fairly typical view. We also connected with **Red-knobbed Fruit-dove** and **Red-knobbed Imperial Pigeon** both Bismark/Admiralty endemics.

We spent most of our time in an area on just on the east side of the top of the pass where **Red-banded Flowerpecker** (another endemic) was fairly common and conspicuous. When I found a small red and black honeyeater it was initially identified as New Ireland Myzomela, a rarely seen endemic, and one of our main targets. But the Lelet Plateau is pretty much at the lower limits of its altitudinal range, with the largely inaccessible area in the south of New Ireland its stronghold. Reference back to texts in Dalom that evening revealed we had actually had good views of **Red-tinted Myzomela**, not the hoped-for endemic. We would spend the next three days looking for N.I. Myzomela unsuccessfully. We also observed the local race of **White-bellied Cuckoo-Shrike**, which Mark explained is a candidate for a split on the basis of the much heavier bill that the New Ireland birds have than on the mainland. Lots of **Red-chinned Lorikeets** flew by, and we also had, tantalisingly, two birds fly past that were probably the endemic White-naped Lory, but without seeing the diagnostic eponymous feature we could not claim them other than on altitude, since Eastern Black-capped Lory also occurs (at lower levels) in New Ireland.

We stayed at altitude until it was getting dark. Piling back into the vans we drove a little way down to a clearing where we got out in anticipation of a final endemic of the day. Almost immediately 3-4 New Ireland Boobook responded to Mark's iPod with their amazing song that sounded almost like a deep heavy-metal guitar. We saw a shape drift across in the dark once or twice but it took some time to pin one down. Finally eagle-eyed Mark managed to track the incoming flight of one against the dark sky and pinpoint the open branch on which it had landed. With Mark warning this species is easily spooked by the spotlight, we all lined up directly behind him to get a clear direct line of

sight, before on went the torch, and there was a **New Ireland Boobook**, only my second ever *Ninox*. It had its back to us, but swivelled its head to look down at us briefly, then after only about 10-15 seconds, flew off into the darkness: in spite of the brief view, for its voice alone this was bird of the day for me and pretty much bird of the trip so far given the problematic start to the trip we'd had. We celebrated with a couple of cold beers, washed in the gorgeous stream, and retired to a well-earned and good night's sleep.

1/7

We were up before light to have a pretty good breakfast before we were back in the Hiluxes heading up to the Lelet Plateau once more. It had rained overnight and the Limbin Rd (in reality a pretty rough track) was in a poor and difficult state. Our progress was halted when Mark managed to get the front of the two Hiluxes bogged in a deep rut. After 20min or so of trying various things we managed to free it, to much relief all round. Billy, driving the second Hilux took stock and cruised by apparently effortlessly, amid cheers from us, maybe a touch of embarrassment from Mark, and certainly even further relief that finally we could get birding again.

We birded similar areas to yesterday (there is only one road and no trails, so we had little choice!) Early on we saw two more **Pied Coucal**, including one that I found perched unobtrusively allowing digiscoped pictures, and Steve located a pair of very attractive **White-bibbed Fruit-doves**. We observed more **Red-chinned Lorikeets**. A flock circled past us and out of sight several times, sometimes with more individuals than others, before eventually a few landed and gave good scoped views. We also had views of the small, unobtrusive and aptly named **Bismark Hanging Parrot**, found by Chris feeding while hanging upside-down on thin branches in the canopy. The highlight of the morning was an all-too-brief view of **Ribbon-tailed Drongo**. This is arguably the most attractive of the otherwise fairly drab, dark Drongo family, sporting two ludicrously long tail streamers. It was posed beautifully on an exposed branch looking out to the Pacific Ocean, but flew before either Steve or I could snap a digiscoped shot. We were relieved to get this key endemic because on the way up yesterday the front van had flushed one, but languishing in the second van, we missed out. We had supposed them to be fairly common but we struggled to get further sightings. Two more were heard later, but "zey voodn't come out!".

As the day heated up, inevitably the birding slowed down. By late morning it was exceedingly hot and uncomfortable. Although this was just about bearable when there were birds about, for about an hour we saw little and could hear even less as a Cicada chirped out a deafening whine at up at 100dB drowning out any bird songs or calls and driving us crazy. Again I found myself questioning why we were here rather than in the mainland highlands.

To escape the constant drone we moved further on to the "far side" of the plateau, going further than we had yesterday to the point where the track loops around through another village. Here an **Oriental Hobby** flew past and we heard several **Finsch's Imperial Pigeons**, notable for their distinctive song that reminded me of the start of an air-raid siren, before finally Chris found a perched female. Also on this west side we had nice views of a beautiful **Golden Monarch**, **Brush Cuckoo** posed nicely, **White-rumped Swiftlets** zipped past, and a single **Blyth's Hornbill** was interesting since Mark had not previously recorded one here.

We returned to Dalom for lunch where Steve and I took the opportunity for a swim in the idyllic stream. Particularly pleasant was to walk upstream to the bridge over the highway, clamber down to the stream and float on the current until the stream reached the incoming waves where you would be swirled around as if in a spa.

After lunch, feeling refreshed, we headed north on the Boluminsky Highway for looking for suitable grasslands that would hold munias. After about 15km we stopped at an open area with some fenced off machinery – apparently a sand works – with some promising looking patches of unkempt grass. Over the next hour or more we observed over 40 **New Britain (or Buff-bellied) Munia** a striking small species, all dark apart from a pinky-buff stomach, chestnut tail and silver beak. This species is gradually naturally increasing its range from the south, and to some degree displacing the endemic New Ireland Munia which we had hoped to see. However as we watched more closely we observed in amongst the flock at least 10 other munias with a dark brown head and pinky-buff stomach and breast, looking like duller Hooded Munias (and very similar to the unusual bird seen near the airport). At first I agreed with Chris that these seemed likely to be juveniles of the New Britain, but Steve was equally sure these were indeed New Ireland. Even Mark was in some doubt, but this was cleared up when we returned to Dalom and confirmed them as **New Ireland Munia**, thus completing a hat-trick of the endemic Munias.

We rounded off our stop here with some nice observations of **Great Flying Fox**. About 20 or more were coming to eat bread fruit at a tree in the sand works, and we had excellent views both in flight and as they hung upside down munching the heavy fruits. Back at the guest-house we once again bathed in the crystal waters of the stream and watched a stunning sunset over the Pacific.



Our final morning in Dalom and we returned to the Lelet Plateau, birding from dawn until around 11am, and it proved well worth the re-visit. We started birding in the open area near the top where we had spent most time the previous days. Again we had flyover flocks of lorys at regular intervals, but each time we were lucky to get much on them. By the end we were convinced these were White-naped, but it was still a little unsatisfactory. We spent more time over on the western side, where again pigeons and doves were among the highlights. Again we had brief views of **Stefan's Ground Dove**, displaying **Pied Cuckoo Dove**, and more **Finch's Imperial Pigeon**. This time a pair flew across the track in response to Mark's recording, one wing-clapping as it did. A flock of 4 **Papuan Mountain Pigeon** also flew over. We descended on foot towards Dalom noting some good parrots. I found a couple of **Song Parrots** and was able to scope them feeding unobtrusively in the canopy, which was nice because our previous records had been flyovers identified by Mark. As we descended to 650m a single lory flew over our heads and perched on the other side of the valley, and we immediately landed our scopes on a cracking **White-naped Lory**. When you have nearly 8000 species under your belt, lifers don't come along very often, and Mark was as excited and animated as we'd seen him all trip. Steve and I grabbed some digiscoped shots, which must be among the only photographs of this species ever, while Helmut managed some even rarer video footage.



Soon afterwards Chris picked up some **Black-headed White-eye** in a flame tree and I had brief views in my scope, while at the same site a pair of Wood-swallows gave mediocre flight views. Through my bins the birds were overall fairly white in appearance, and had to be **White-backed (or Bismark) Wood-swallow** since this is the only one of the family on New Ireland.

We descended further around a few bends but the bird activity had slowed and Mark and Billy wandered back up the track to fetch the Hiluxes. It had been a good morning, but with not much happening and the day now quite hot, the rest of us stood around fairly unenthusiastic and keen for the return of the vans. A black bird landed in a tree only about 10m away. We all saw it, but assumed it was yet another Island Crow, one of the commonest birds of the last few days, and the others didn't even raise their bins. For lack of anything else to do I mustered the enthusiasm to glass it and was amazed and delighted to see not a crow, but a pigeon. I announced this excitedly and was greeted with some incredulity by the others, especially SMRY, but soon they too were watching a **Black Imperial Pigeon**. Helmut managed to get his camcorder onto it and to some amusement from myself and Steve, his commentary, in a thick Germanic accent, described it by its alternative name, "**Bismark Imperial Pigeon**". It flew to the other side of the valley but continued to give great scope views just long enough for Mark to return, but Billy, only just behind him, was 4 or 5 seconds too late. A few minutes later I noted a couple of all-dark pigeons in flight that may well have been the same species.

Back in Dalom we packed up and then headed north back to Kavieng. A brief stop at the mangrove site from 30<sup>th</sup> Black Bittern site allowed me to claw back **Little Kingfisher** as one zipped under the bridge and I was able to note the purpley-blue back as it sped underneath me. We arrived late afternoon into Kavieng, dropped off our passengers (a local doctor and his daughter) and checked in to the Malagan Beach Resort hotel, certainly more upmarket than Mark's preferred hotel, but rather unfriendly. Nevertheless it was great to relax, stubbies in hand, in the hotel pool gazing out over the harbour as the sun set.



3/7

After the disaster of the first leg of the tour, today was a day both Steve and I had been looking forward to tremendously. We would be visiting the Island of Tench, only a few miles in circumference, some 60 miles north of Kavieng, less than 2 degrees from the equator. Tench has only a handful of human inhabitants but holds thousands of seabirds and some interesting isolated terrestrial species as well.

We arrived at the dock where our boat was waiting, but we were greeted with some unwelcome news: the skipper was not ready. In PNG Rugby League is huge, and last night the town had been gripped by State of Origin fever. Our skipper had been forced to make an unscheduled detour to the police station en route to the boat after a "difficult" encounter with all-night reveller as he came down to the dock pre-dawn to prepare.

Fortunately we were only delayed by 20min, but within minutes of setting out we had to return to the dock when a faulty fuel hose popped off. "Here we go again..." Another deeply frustrating delay while the skipper and his mate repaired the engine, and finally we were on our way over an hour later than scheduled. An **Osprey** drifted across the bay for the first bird of the day.

The swell was minimal, probably less than a metre, but our speed through the water meant the ride was very bumpy and the use of bins almost impossible. The first sea-bird I saw was a medium-sized shearwater. To my mind this was not Wedge-tailed as it appeared too pale, but I have no alternative identification. Soon afterwards we really did see a **Wedge-tailed Shearwater**, and later a **Bulwer's Petrel**. This latter bird I got onto but was unable to see enough for my own satisfaction – the ID was down to Mark. Other than these few pelagic species and numerous flying fish, the trip to Tench was uneventful.

On the approach to Tench, a forest covered atoll only a mile in diameter, from a distance we could see hundreds of birds wheeling over the island. As we got closer **Greater Frigatebirds** came over in numbers to check out the boat, as well as smaller numbers of **Lesser Frigatebirds** and **Red-footed Boobies** (both light and dark morphs). The smaller and more elegant **Black** and **Brown Noddies** were also common.



First duty was to pay our respect to the locals who greeted us as we landed. We walked through their village surrounded by birds everywhere. For the first time in the trip I had abandoned the scope, and brought only my new DSLR, which finally came into its own. Stunning **White Terns** were deliciously common, and we noted several with their unfeasibly precarious “nests” – basically a slight hollow on a

thin horizontal branch. Within minutes of landing we had found **Atoll Starling**. This taxon is rarely sighted because it is restricted to small atolls such as Tench. Though this was almost certainly the rarest bird we saw in the entire trip, it failed to get the pulse racing, looking much like any other all-dark Starling though with orange/yellow eyes. The locals even showed us a tame “pet” Atoll Starling that ate a banana from the hand.

We ate our picnic lunch in the shade and then wandered around the village noting **Black Myzomela**, **Island Monarch** (both small island specialist), **Pacific Imperial Pigeon**, and literally dozens of the very strange looking and rare **Nicobar Pigeon**. Birds that are normally skittish and skulking are much more brazen on such an island, free from mammalian predators such as rats. Towards the back of the village a **Melanesian Scrubfowl** walked out across our path and I managed a few shots with the SLR. Other

nice birds seen on our walk around the island included **Yellow-bibbed Fruit-dove** and **Island Monarch**, as well as the interesting sight of a male **Greater Frigatebird** puffing out its balloon-like red throat sack. One of my top targets for the day was White-tailed Tropicbird but this required some patience. The locals took us to a known nest site, but the tree was in dense jungle and with no sign of the occupants, we pushed our way through the undergrowth the 10 so or so metres to the reef where we would have a more open aspect and more chance of seeing them. **Eastern Reef Egrets** were fishing here (both light and dark morphs) and then Chris picked up a white-morph **White-tailed Tropicbird** circling above us. I didn't immediately get onto it, but fortunately the





elegant stonker made a few circuits giving great views in the bins. Lack of experience with the camera meant I was unable to get a single focussed picture. A **Brown Noddy** nesting here also gave superb views in flight and on the nest.

We'd planned to carry on walking and circumnavigate the island, hoping especially for Beach Kingfisher, but our late start meant we now had no time for this so we retreated to the village to prepare to leave. With a few moments to spare Steve and I took a brief refreshing dip in the idyllic tropical waters. Frigatebirds followed us for a mile or two as we departed, but otherwise the journey back was virtually bird-free.

4/7

Most of the day today was spent exploring the islands off the coast of New Ireland. We began with a trip to Djaul, an island of about 100km<sup>2</sup> to the south of Kavieng. It took over an hour in our 6-seater banana boat (basically a metal hull with some wooden planks for seats and a small outboard motor). We observed one or two seabirds en route but nothing special, before arriving at the village of Sunuma. As usual we left it to Mark to explain why we were there, sort out any payments, and find out from the locals where we could find our targets. We were led by the usual gaggle of adults, children and dogs though the village to some less disturbed forest where we had some good views of 3-4 of our primary target, "**Djaul**" **Pied Monarch**. This race of Pied Monarch shows much white in the tail and surely a potential split. We also had good views of **Golden Whistler** here, not a lifer, but nice to get for the trip all the same because it's a very attractive bird.

As we made our way back along the trails we reached a stream, and the locals leading the way jumped across with effortless, sure-footed grace. Helmut, next in line, approached the edge, sussed it out and then launched himself in a rather ungainly fashion across the narrow stream. His feet landed on the far side but then we watched as, in slow motion he began to topple helplessly backwards, arms flapping about for anything to grasp, the weight of his rucksack dragging him inexorably down until he landed on his back in the stream. Immediately the kids behind us erupted in laughter. Steve and I suppressed our own guffaws and then after a slightly-too-long pause, Steve was first to react and clambered down to help as Helmut still flailed about like an upturned tortoise. Fortunately the old chap was ok apart from his embarrassment, but the expensive camcorder in his rucksack fared less well. It was water-logged and completely ruined. He had brought a backup, but would now be using inferior equipment for all of the top targets of the trip.

Back in the banana boat we now motored north, destination New Hannover. In the open water between Djaul and the mainland we encountered a feeding frenzy of fish and birds. A shoal of small fish were being attacked from above and below. Below a group of tuna/bonito were feasting, periodically leaping from the water at the end of an attack, while above 1000s of seabirds wheeled around enjoying the spoils. These were mostly **Black Noddies**, but the flock also contained a few **Boobies**, and **Terns (Crested, Bridled and Common** all here).

Once back to the mainland we skirted the shores of the various islands off the northern tip of the mainland. At one point I picked up something with a white top on the reef. First impressions were a bird and, thinking it might be a **Beach Kingfisher**, I called for the boat to slow. As it did so I suddenly worried that it was actually a post and prepared for the embarrassment of a duff call, but then was relieved to hear Chris confirm my initial diagnosis. In fact here we had good views of 3 birds, though

photography proved a challenge. I managed some record shots with the SLR but digiscoping while bobbing about in a boat was a non-starter for Steve.

For the last km or so to our stop on New Hannover the heavens opened in a massive tropical downpour. Though we privately christened Chris "Gandalf" because of the wizardly appearance he had with his white beard and poncho, at least his poncho afforded some protection. I donned the lightweight waterproof jacket I had brought, but the small umbrellas wielded by Steve and Mark were utterly useless at any speed in the boat. Though my top remained relatively dry, I was over-cautious on our wet landing and water flooded uncomfortably into my boots.

Our target here was the local race of Buff-bellied Munia, or "**New Hanover Munia**". This is not yet split, but is all dark, without the buff belly. We made our way to an area of grassland and took shelter between some small huts, getting great views of both adult with rich rusty tails, as well as juveniles with a dark brown cap, demarcated from a blotchy buff bodies and paler golden tails. We also had superb views of **Golden-headed Cisticola**, while Steve managed some digiscoped pictures of a White-bellied Cuckoo-Shrike on a palm as we made our way back to the boat.

We kept our eyes peeled on the way back for Beach Thick-knee, a particular target for Chris, but saw very little other than a small pod of Indo-pacific Bottlenose Dolphin as we re-entered the harbour area.

The birding did not stop here, and Mark has us back in the vans travelling to an area of swamp forest 24km south of Kavieng, afforded some limited protection by virtue of being too wet for an oil palm plantation. We birded the Kaut Rd, west from the highway for an hour or so until dusk. The key target here was a final endemic that was still possible, **Bismark Pied Monarch**. Mark played his iPod a few times but had no vocal response. However just as we were giving up hope Steve picked up this beauty to add to the Djaul race from this morning. Another all-dark flycatcher was found but I did not get enough on it to distinguish which of Lesser or Shining Flycatcher this was. A **Striated Heron** flew overhead in the direction of the beach, and yet another low fly-past of **Stefan's Ground Dove** gave my best views yet, though still unenhanced by optics. An **Osprey** showed very well, eating a parrot fish, and a **Nicobar Pigeon** flew over. Our blaze attitude to this major world rarity after yesterday's glut brought a wry comment from MvB.

5/7

Today was primarily a transit day, though this being a Birdquest trip we used every possible hour for birding. At dawn we were back at the Kaut Rd, though the birding was disappointing, and my heart was not really in it. I was suffering from an upset stomach and having periodic stomach and bowel cramps. Somehow I managed to avoid soiling my undies, but I was desperate to get back to the hotel and find some immodium. We had no new birds this morning, but did have nice views of **Red-knobbed Fruit-Dove** and **Collared Kingfisher**. MvB called Pygmy Parrot as two small green torpedos bombed over. I thought I saw some red on them, which would have ruled out Pygmy Parrot so I was unable to tick this.

Our flight to back to Port Moresby took us via Rabaul, the capital of New Britain, and we had great views of the still active volcano on the town's outskirts as we landed. Having been delayed in Kavieng (surprise, surprise) we touched down in Rabaul too late to connect with the Port Moresby

flight, so we were re-routed to Lae and Madang and finally Port Moresby. We had therefore visited all three of the coming fortnight's destinations and still not "done" them.

6/7

For once our Air Niugini flight left on time, and we arrived at Manus pretty much on schedule. Our first **Dollarbird** of the trip posed on a wire as we transferred from the airport strip on Los Negros to the main island and our comfortable hotel in Lorengau. Manus has half a dozen endemics but one stands out from the rest by a mile: Superb Pitta. This literally superb bird was thought extinct until rediscovered near the village of Rossun by Jonathan Newman and Guy Dutton in the early 90s. It may in fact be fairly widespread on Manus but there is limited access to most of the island, and *the* spot to see it has become a tract of secondary forest south east of Lorengau owned by the laid back Timothy, a local chief.

We met up with Aaron, our local bird man, and drove to Timothy's house where we birded his land from 2pm. A muddy walk up the slope to Timothy's house revealed a lovely grassy clearing overlooking nice forest, and then we walked on for some 800m of narrow muddy trails in roughly the direction of Rossun to a couple of sites in some secondary forest where MvB had had the pitta on his previous visit some three years earlier. Regularly Aaron imitated the double *Woo-oo Woo-oo* call but we had no response. It would have been good to nail this top target straight away but we were fairly relaxed that we still had two dawns, which would be our best chance. While we were still at the first site I noticed movement in the canopy and locked onto our first endemic, the smart **Admiralty Pied Monarch**, and then we found our second on the way back, pitta-less, from the second site: an ugly **Manus Friarbird**, or **Chouka**, the onomatopaeic local name. Back at Timothy's house we birded from the clearing. A pair of **Black-masked White-eyes** flitted between some open trees giving good views, **White-rumped Swiftlets** buzzed around, and another endemic posed well: **Manus Cuckoo-Shrike**, whose key diagnostic feature is a thin black line leading back from behind the eye, but otherwise closely resembles White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike. In one of the more surreal moments of the trip Timothy started quizzing me and Steve about our sex lives and how could we cope being away from our wives for so long? What on earth did we do instead? Turns out that while his wife is away (as she was during our visit), he "makes do" with one of her sisters. It's good to be the king.

As the evening drew on the trisyllabic growl, Rrrrr-rrrr-rrr of a Manus Boobook drifted up towards us from some distance but we were unable to locate it.

Dinner that evening was enlivened by a Python-esque conversation with a waiter:

"Can I have diet coke please"

"Yes, certainly"

"Actually, can I change that to a sprite?"

"One coke, one sprite?"

"No coke, just sprite"

"OK, so you want two sprites"

"No, just one sprite"

Waiter disappears and returns two minutes later:

"How many sprites do you want?"...

We headed out in the pre-dawn darkness the few miles to Timothy's House and descended on foot to the first site from yesterday. Somewhat to my surprise we stopped only briefly as Aaron called *Woo-oo Woo-oo* a couple of times and we moved on without really waiting for a response. As we strode further in to a 3<sup>rd</sup> site I began to worry as Timothy started hacking with his machete at very overgrown and little used path. We trudged on for another 1.5-2km through mud, bamboo and secondary forest when distantly through the bush the *woo-oo woo-oo* of a real pitta reached us, and we froze, a mixture of relief and renewed tension sweeping through the group. Then upping the ante even more, a second bird called and came tantalizingly close until, without being seen, it went silent and then only responded distantly to Mark's iPod.

We carried on deeper into the forest. At one point Steve and Billy dropped behind and reappeared with the slightly gripping news they'd had a Variable Dwarf Kingfisher. After another 10-15mins walking we arrived in a slightly open area where we pinned down a smart **Admiralty Pied Monarch**.

Fantastically, as we watched the Monarch, the more desirable endemic started calling again. This time for once the iPod brought it closer and we stood motionless in a line. All of a sudden, quickly but calmly, Steve whispered "I've got it!" and mild panic set in: he was too far down the line for his precise directions to be much use to me. As I scanned frantically Mark called "flying right" and I quickly locked on to a dark chunky bird, noting the flash of bright red on the belly and iridescent blue on the wings, before it was lost to view. My relief at getting tickable views of **Superb Pitta** was immediately tempered by the prospect of having to settle for flight views of one of the trip's key targets. MvB played the recording again and for once on the trip it did the trick, with Aaron relocating it high up. Though the views were partially obscured by a branch, we could still enjoy the pitta, its bright red and blue patches like beacons against the jet black stocky body and head. Every time it called it twitched its wings twice in time with the call. It flew to a closer, lower perch in a hooked branch showing brilliantly, and I regretted that I had neither SLR nor scope handy, a school-boy mistake. Cautiously I went for the former, tucked deep in my rucksack on the ground a few metres away, wrestled it out and got all the settings right – this was the moment when my outlay would come into its own – I took aim and ... the little f\*\*ker flew. After a few more bursts from Mark's iPod Timothy relocated it but more distant and with its back to us. I banged out some poor record shots but decided viewing was the order of the day.

As we relaxed after this successful twitch I 'fessed up that this was my first ever of this desirable family. I had some way to go to get catch up with Billy – it was his 22<sup>nd</sup> and his main reason for being on the trip! After gathering and packing our various kit that was strewn around the clearing, Aaron pointed out a small "lazy snake", a ground boa, we'd been sharing the clearing with, and then we set off back towards Timothy's house. As we were slithering our way along the 2.5km of wet, difficult, slippery and muddy terrain I reflected on how awful it would have felt to be returning Pitta-less in the knowledge that we'd be doing the walk at least two more times with no guarantee of anything to show for it. As it was, we'd had great views of one of the top two targets of the trip and one of the two or three rarest Pittas in the world. To round the morning off we also scored with great views of a perched **Variable Dwarf Kingfisher** at a small stream, and a **Variable Goshawk** at a clearing near Timothy's house.

After a brief chill-out session after lunch at the hotel (Chris could not bear to have birdless hours so scanned over the water and had the trip's only White-Bellied Sea-Eagle), we were back on the road mid-afternoon, driving up towards Rossun. Aaron's eyes were amazing, picking out a pair of **Meek's Pygmy Parrots** from the back of the jeep as we drove along. I managed to get briefly onto one, but like so many of the birds on the trip, it disappeared before we could get views to savour, and in this case before Steve even got on it at all.

We stopped at a village having accumulated the usual posse of children and others en route, and again the locals managed to find with their naked eyes, what we and our 1000s pounds worth of optical enhancement could not: another **Meek's Pygmy Parrot** in dense foliage. We all eventually got decent enough views but the light was appalling for photography. A walk down the hillside opposite the village yielded nice views of *yet another* **Nicobar Pigeon**, then only a few metres along the trail to the main village Steve and I stopped for cracking views of a pair of **Moustached Tree-swifts** in perfect light for digiscoping. As we dawdled for a few last shots the others carried on down a lovely grassy avenue. Just as we were packing up our scopes and cameras Aaron pointed another pair of **Meek's** this time perched in the open on a dead branch – magic!

Final stop was near Aaron's house, apparently a good stakeout for Manus Boobook, the only Manus endemic to have eluded us so far, though with 15 children running around playing and the usual escort of beetelnut chewing and spitting adults in tow, I did not have high hopes. As the afternoon drew into evening we noted a distant **Island Imperial Pigeon** (my first decent, properly tickable views), and a pair of **Osprey**, one with a fish in its talons, before the first growl of a **Manus Boobook** was heard.



With the light fading, Steve, who clearly had his eyes in today, yet again announced "I've got it". I finally nailed down where he was looking while the others, also now looking at the same spot, concluded he was looking at some large fruit (his response: "a fruit with tertials"). I reserved judgement and kept quiet knowing I would have plenty of opportunity for piss-taking in the days, weeks and even years to come. Then through the gloom we all saw the "fruit" move, and suddenly and disappointingly briefly, a pair of orange eyes glowed dimly back at us, before it flew and was lost for good.

8/7

The plan for today was to take a banana boat to the island of Sivisa, one of the few offshore islands within reach that that was known/suspected to hold the rare and even more rarely seen Admiralty Rufous Fantail. Our original destination, Tong, was ruled out as being too problematic because of local land disputes.

The day started well with Billy and Steve picking up a **Black Bittern** in flight in from the wharf at Momote, but went downhill as the little banana boat struggled to make any headway into the wind

and mild but growing swell. Surely mindful of his “corporate” responsibility, MvB terminated the plan when we were barely ¼ of the way there, sensibly judging that the weather was only getting worse, so even if we made it to Sivisa, the journey home could be perilous. On the return to Momote we noted a few **Rufous Night Heron**, a cracking pair of **Beach Kingfisher** which we stopped to photograph, and a flyover of 15+ **Nicobar Pigeons**, becoming one of the trips commonest birds!. Back at our starting point we ploughed on through the (apparently crocodile infested) channel between Manus and Los Negros, noting 2 **Lesser Frigatebirds** and a few **Island Imperial Pigeons**. At the northern end of the channel we stopped to observe a flock of terns, most of which were **Common** but with a (Greater) **Crested** thrown in, as well as a lifer **Black-naped**, a very smart dainty tern with a pinkish flush to the breast.

Seeadler Harbour, a natural harbour north of Lorengau was of great strategic importance in World War II (as was much of this eastern part of Manus) as a staging post for the Allies’ push into the Pacific in 1944 and as a means to isolate the important Japanese base at Rabaul. There remain signs of the war all over, from concrete pads and bunkers in Lorengau, to rusting hulks in the bay. We approached one such wreck near the island of Hauwei over the much calmer sea in the bay, and landed on the island. We were escorted around by some sweet children whose numbers grew as we progressed. Almost the first bird seen was a female **Shining Flycatcher**, whose rufous plumage had me thinking briefly that we had managed to find an Admiralty Rufous Fantail after all. Other birds of note on Hauwei were another **Black-naped Tern**, distant but atmospheric as it fished the waters between the island and the “mainland”; 4 **Island Monarchs** (restricted to small offshore islands); several **Island Imperial Pigeons** for my best views so far; **Black Noddy**, **McInlay’s Cuckoo Dove**; and our best views of **Stefan’s Ground Dove**, which obligingly walked around on one of the grassy paths through the village gardens. We also admired a huge Megapod mound, but had less luck pinning down its architect.

Back in Lorengau around 4pm we returned to Timothy’s place hopeful of better views of Manus Boobook. A **Dollarbird** posed for pictures, and we also picked up **Black-masked White-eye**, but no further sightings of the owl.

9/7

Today was another transfer day and so we were afforded a rare lie in. We arrived deliberately early at the airport and spent some time watching for waders on the airpstrip in the searing heat and humidity. A **Yellow Wagtail** found by Steve was an island first, while we also grilled a **Lesser Sand Plover** (eventually finding several) some **Pacific Golden Plover**, and **Wimbrel**. We flew directly to Lae airport where we scoped the runway there while waiting for our bags, yielding numerous **Black** and **Brahminy Kites**, and **Papuan Harrier**. The journey to Lae itself is about 20km along a road notorious for hijacking and to one of the most lawless towns on earth. In one of the more surreal moments of a trip that produced many, we made the journey in an armoured vehicle with armed guards, and stayed in a pleasant up-market hotel, a secure oasis surrounded by walls and razor wire to keep the baddies out.

Around the grounds we noted **Willy Wagtail**, and the interesting pet Huon Tree Kangaroos, but pretty soon Steve and I availed ourselves of a pair of cold stubbies and a swim in the pool. Back in the room I noticed that my left eye, which had begun to hurt a little, was horribly bloodshot and

infected. I was grateful for the Amoxicillin I had brought for just such an eventuality, but this would rule out wearing contact lenses for some time.

We met for dinner in one of the hotel restaurants where Mark had a bombshell for us. We would, after all, be spending 4 days, not 3 in the Huon. The price was that we would now have only two nights – one full day and a bit either side – at Keki Lodge in the Adelberts. This was potentially devastating news. I could only imagine the turmoil within Steve, for whom the entire success of a the month-long trip hung solely on getting Fire-maned Bowerbird. Penny’s last words to me before we left were “Make sure he gets the damn bird”. We’d now had our time reduced to do so by 30% to less than 48 hours there. Steve hid it from the others well, in public agreeing this was the right decision. Indeed Mark explained he’d been placed on the spot: our scheduled departure for Sunday was now impossible because the charter company needed a rest-day for the pilot. We could leave the Huon a day early or a day late, and Mark reasoned that the extra day would be of more value in the Huon.

10/7

Another early rise saw me and Steve last down to the departure. We joined our escort to the airport which picked up a few more passengers en route. We still arrived in plenty of time to be weighed for the charter, a NZ built single engine craft designed specifically for short grassy runways. As we waited we scanned the airstrip and found **Australian Bushlark**, as predicted by Mark, 3-4 **Masked Lapwing**, a **Golden-headed Cisticola**, as well as abundant **Black Kites** and a female **Papuan Harrier**.

The trip over the mountains of the Huon was spectacular. We barely gained sufficient height to skim over the lowest saddle the pilot could find. The view over hundreds of square kilometres of deforested slopes, especially on the southern side, was deeply depressing. We touched down on the grass airstrip in the village of Wasu on the northern coast of the “wart” on the dragon’s back, with seemingly the entire village there to greet the arrival of the aircraft. While Mark wandered off to arrange the services of a local with a vehicle to get us up to Gatop, our destination at 900m for the next few nights, we scanned the airstrip for birds. Some distant **Torresian Imperial Pigeons** were the main interest.





After another long wait (TIPNG) Mark returned with a chap and a landrover and the usual posse of hangers on. We stopped for some supplies, though the village had run out of beer and there had been no delivery for some time, and headed up the mountain. BoP calls as we ascended above 500m were Emperor Bird of Paradise and we finally felt like we were in the right place for classic PNG birding now.

It turned out that our arrival at the mission run by Lutheran priest was unexpected; messages had been received making enquiries, but not the confirmation of our final itinerary. Such are the vagaries of dealing with such a remote place. Nevertheless Gerhard was immensely accommodating. We rested on his balcony while Mark took care of logistics. **Great Woodswallows** were a tick here, and an apparently large raptor had us grabbing for our optics thinking we were about to have a close encounter with a Gurney's Eagle, but it turned out to be a much smaller **Variable Goshawk**. Superb BoPs called from tantalisingly close but out of sight.

Having installed our sleeping bags and mosquito nets in the basic dormitory that was to be our base for the next 4 nights, we set off up the mountain in one of Gerhard's landrovers with Sam, local chap as our guide. We birded the slopes above Satop between 1400 and 1800m. It was difficult and slow and we were regularly interrupted by rain; not such a surprise in one of the wettest places on earth, but a pain constantly having to dry optics, especially now that I was wearing glasses, not contacts. Mark called in a **Mountain Kingfisher**, close relative of the Yellow-billed we'd seen near Alotau on our 1<sup>st</sup> day of birding, and there were a few fantails and whistlers that I failed to get onto but would claw back over the next few days. Still, after over an hour of this I was beginning to wonder why we had been pinning so many hopes on the Huon to deliver. To add to my misery my scope fell over damaging my digiscoping adaptor.

A **Little Eagle** flew over and for once I was brandishing the SLR (a consequence of not being able to digiscope) instead of having it languish deep in my rucksack, so some passable photos resulted.

Eventually our patience was rewarded. A **Huon Astrapia**, one of three endemic Huon BoPs we were after, flew across the road but then proved elusive. We continued walking up and picked up a few more in flight, including a full adult male resplendent with superb, unfeasibly ridiculously long and unwieldy tail. Not long after this another shiny, dark, long-tailed bird flew over. Though the first



reaction was another *Astrapia*, different flight and shape indicated that this was the second of our key endemic targets, **Wahne's Parotia**. I found another feeding in tree right next to the road and alerted the others, though ironically they ended up with better views than me because although they failed to pick it up initially as I grilled it through bins, it flew closer where everyone else saw it but I failed to pick it up before it disappeared into the dense forest. As well as the two BoPs we also started to see more small stuff as well, noting **Brown-breasted Gerygone, Black and Friendly Fantails, Buff-faced Scrubwren, and Regent Whistler**.

The next few minutes became even more manic. Having spent the last couple of hours waiting for the good birding, we now had a glut, with too much activity to keep track of everything. While Steve digiscope'd a gorgeous **Huon *Astrapia*** that had perched in full view, Mark was calling new species at a rate of knots, mostly finding new stuff himself but also trying hard to keep up with birds that each of us was finding but unable to identify without the expert's eye: **Mountain Peltops, Mid-mountain Berrypecker** (one of a few desirable species of this New Guinea endemic family); a pair of unobtrusive **Brehm's Tiger Parrot** was found in a fruiting tree that also held several **Huon *Astrapia*** and **Wahne's Parotia**; I missed a Spotted Berrypecker and Papuan Lorikeet, but did see most of the other species, including **Papuan Mountain Pigeon, Red-collared Honeyeater, Black-throated Honeyeater, Rufous-backed Honeyeater, Ornate Melidictes**, and the top honeyeater target here, the large rare and endemic **Spangled Honeyeater**, giving us a clean-up of the (achievable) high-altitude endemics in the Huon. We ended our time on the mountain well satisfied.

Back at the dorm we washed under a tap outside, reconstituted our "Kokoda Trail" food packs, and discovered that the toilets, 200m across a muddy field, were a hole in the ground with a strategically placed metal bar across the middle a couple of feet down, on which a turd balanced precariously. And they stank! My initial strategy was to take a deep breath, get in and position myself and hope to get out without having to take a further breath, but I realised in time that the danger of passing out and falling down the hole significantly outweighed the gagging that accompanied every breath.

After dinner I wandered up to Gerhard's house to see if he had any tools that might be useful for repairing my adaptor. His study was unlike any other priest's: instead of religious books, his shelf space was occupied by countless draws of electrical and mechanical components. This is a man who has devoted his entire life the communities of Gatop and Wasu, taught himself electrical engineering and pretty much single handed designed and built a hydro-electric plant to power both villages. Quite humbling for me, the Oxford engineer who has done nothing like as useful. Gerhard had a selection of alun keys and I was able to tighten the loose joints up so that I thought it was fixed. Sadly, as soon as I went to use it the next day I realised that it had come loose again – the fall had actually stripped the thread from the sockets and the weight of the camera simply pulled them loose again.

A few of us had a quick evening stroll around the gardens hoping for either Marbled or Papuan Frogmouth. We heard the latter and pretty much pinned it down, but only realised where it was (on the far side of a thick trunk we had been looking directly at) when a shape slipped off in the darkness. We retired to try and sleep in spite of pigs and chickens under the floor and loud snoring above it.

The next morning we again birded the higher altitudes above Satop. Along the way we picked a Satop local who, along with Sam, we dropped off on the roadside near where they said a Parotia display court exists, so they could build a makeshift hide for us for the next day. This would surely be one of the highlights of the trip and we were salivating at the prospect, though MvB tried his best to play this down saying we were very unlikely to witness the full dance as memorably featured the advert we'd seen at Heathrow.

The day started well, with our first stop yielding a crippling encounter with 9 **Vulturine Parrots**. This large, striking looking red and black parrot is classified as Vulnerable by IUCN and was one of the birds of the trip. Bare, black skin on its face, and the way crown sweeps down to merge seamlessly with a massive black bill terminated with a huge pointy hook, such as is found in big raptors like sea eagles, mean that although the official name is now Pesquet's Parrot, for me Vulturine captures its sinister vulture-like appearance so much better.

We ascended on foot, having no luck with BoPs, but gradually picking up a few extra birds including **Tit Berrypecker**. With the hide complete we were joined by the locals and ascended to a clearing at the top of Duko Pass (1840m) from where we had a fantastic view down the next valley. Here we had **MacGregor's Cuckoo Shrike, Brown Falcon and White-bibbed Fruit-dove**. A Superb BoP called from a distance but we couldn't locate it. As the others walked off back towards the forest Steve and I looked up just in time to clock a cracking **Black-mantled Goshawk**, one of Steve's most wanted on the PNG list.

Things now took a turn for the worse as we returned to the car past some locals doing some gardening. One angry guy took exception to us birding his land. Though our man explained that we had permission (we did), he remained grumpy and accompanied us down to Satop. We had finished our altitude birding for the day anyway, so we thought this was a storm in a teacup. Sadly it would come back to haunt us.

Our target for the afternoon was Emperor BoP, and our local "expert" took us to Gilipang, owned by a chap called Matthew, less than a kilometre below the mission. Matthew escorted us through gardens, across a stream and up a steep track moving into primary forest to a known Emperor BoP display tree. As we climbed to the cries of the EBoPs were getting closer and closer and all the while there was avian interest, especially in the form of Eastern Riflebirds which seemed to be growling away all over the place. This now felt like the real PNG.

To get to a suitable lookout to the display tree we had to climb a last very steep section and then clamber down a sheer 2m drop as best we could. Breathing hard we set up scopes and peered into the dense foliage of the tree where clearly a few Emperor BoPs were present. Brief, unsatisfactory views of **Emperor Bird of Paradise** resulted before within a minute of our arrival we saw them fly off. It was impossible to ignore the likelihood that the rather noisy arrival of our party had flushed them, in spite of the assurances of locals that this was normal and they'd be back. They didn't return. We did, however, hear a Magnificent BoP calling and the locals explained that almost directly below us, under the EBoP display tree, but out of sight from here was a Mag BoP display court. They readily agreed to our request to build a makeshift hide here also, so we could have a crack at this on our last morning, Sunday.

We waited here for some time hoping the EBoPs would return. Steve picked up a distant but nicely posed **Eastern Riflebird**, but overall we left rather disappointed that what had promised some much, failed to deliver.

I was still concerned that I had yet to see supposedly the commonest pitta, Red-bellied (also called Blue-breasted). Indeed the only one of these on the trip so far was Chris' fleeting glimpse of one on the north coast road while we were still in Alotau, what seemed like an age past. I asked Mark if it was worth trying for one here. He seemed surprised but was willing to give it a crack and whipped out his iPod. Amazingly, within seconds it was answered distantly. It was getting late and we knew we'd be back, so we didn't linger to try and bring it closer. Instead we made our way back down the hill to Matthew's place, and then back to the mission.

As we repeated our ritual of wash under the tap, shit in the hole and do as best we could with our Kokoda Trail dried ration packs, we were to have more bad news. The disgruntled Satop local had taken his grievance to the village elders. As best we could ascertain, this guy was jealous that we had agreed to pay the landowner for access to the Parotia site, as well as making a contribution to the village, but that he would not benefit personally. The fact that his own land had been cleared to grow coffee, so held no birds of interest for us, seemed not to enter the equation. To us it seemed clear-cut, and surely the elders would see sense. But in the meantime, with Gerhard reluctant to get involved, this ruled out our chance of seeing the Parotia tomorrow; we simply had to wait on this discussion. TIPNG. This bad news, combined with the crowing cockerel, snorting pigs and 6 snoring blokes made for another restless night.

12/7

Our revised plan was to switch the order of our Parotia and Mag BoP hide vigils, and so we were back at Matthew's place, Gilipang before sunrise. He was not expecting us of course, but our man went in to wake him up. He was happy enough to accompany us the hill, but on arrival it turned out that they had not finished building the hide the previous evening. While we waited in semi-darkness they hurriedly finished it off as we sat around thinking about our rapidly diminishing chances of seeing a Mag BoP today. Finally with the work done, MvB, Steve, I, Chris and Billy crammed into the tiny "hide", essentially a load of palm fronds draped over a spindly wooden frame lashed together with vines. Helmut had decided a walk up the muddy trail in the dark was a trip too far for his aging body, and he was probably right. I peered through the palm fronds that obscured most of my view and could just about make out the moss covered display court about 3m in front of me.

We waited motionless and in silence for about 30min until we heard the Mag BoPs growls. Suddenly, irritatingly and staggeringly stupidly, Sam appeared at the entrance to tell us that what we could hear was the Mag BoP. Doh! We impatiently told him we knew and to bugger off. Renewed more excited calling and fluttering of wing beats indicated unseen activity above us, then suddenly there was movement on the court. Peering through the fronds I was able to make out the dark green shape of the bird, its bright blue bill standing out in the gloom, but I failed to see any of the gold or the curled-wire tail. Then after barely a few seconds, almost as soon as it had appeared, it was gone again. We waited around for another hour but it did not return. All the activity had clearly disturbed it. At least I'd seen something. Afterwards we found out that Chris and Billy had no view whatsoever from the hide to the court and had seen absolutely nothing. They were remarkably calm about this, at least outwardly.

A second dip here was to hurt almost as much. As we waited in vain for the Mag BoP to return, at least two Red-bellied Pittas called. Mark managed to entice one closer with his iPod, and suddenly SMRY, right next to me, yet again announced in a whisper "I've got it". It was apparently in the open on a fallen log, but try as I might I could not get an angle to it, despite leaning across him as far as I dare without causing us all to fall like dominos and bring the hide down around us. We did note **Rusty Mouse Warbler**, and **White-rumped Robin**, good finds, but overall the feeling was one of disappointment.

Eventually we gave up with both species. We were making our way up the steep section track to the EBoP lookout when a Red-bellied Pita called again, very close. We froze and then noticed Sam gesturing behind him – he had it in full view. Yet again, though, our view was obscured and when one of the group, completely against trail etiquette, moved closer to try and see it inevitably flushed. There was no sign of EBoPs at the display tree though we did have **Hooded Pitohui** here, this endemic family notable for being poisonous.

We spent the rest of the morning wandering the trails in these upper reaches of Matthew's land, including a trail that took us directly under the display tree. Here we finally did get some good views of male **Emperor Bird of Paradise**, a classic BoP similar to Raggiana, but with dark brown chest and long white tail-plumes. Sadly we were never in a position to try for photos or video. We also scored nice views of **Pink-spotted Fruit Doves** in the BoP display tree.

While the others chilled out at a lookout about half way down the trail back to Matthew's house, Steve and I spent more time on our own searching for a Red-bellied Pitta. We had vocal duels with at least two birds, initially by doing our own passable imitation of its curious song by whistling with a load of spittle in the back of the throat, and later using MvB's iPod, but neither could convince a bird to show itself. At one especially promising site where a log over the trail afforded some cover, Steve was first on the scene and saw a small stocky bird flush as he broke the horizon, and then needlessly berated himself thereafter, but that was as close as we came.



Deeper into the forest up the slope beyond the EBoP site we were alerted to the presence of a perched **Variable Goshawk** by excited chatter from various songbirds, and we carried on up until we reached a steep ravine. Deep down below us the boom of an invisible Pheasant Pigeon drifted up to us, and soon after we heard the calls of Mag BoP. Noting movement in the canopy Steve quickly locked onto something and excitedly gave me directions to a small window where he had the little jewel somewhat in the open. His directions were spot on and it took me less than two or three seconds to find the spot, just in time lock onto an empty branch, bouncing up and down where a Mag BoP had launched itself deeper into the dense canopy. I had dipped again!

Back at the lookout we rejoined the others and noted some decent birds including **Eastern Riflebird**, **Hooded Pitohui**, **Little Shrike-thrush**, an excellent **Great Cuckoo Dove**, more **Pink-spotted Fruit-doves**, and after some constant calling we finally glimpsed **Yellow-eyed Cuckoo-shrike**. As the afternoon drew into evening we had a flock of **Dusky Lorys** fly

over on their way to roost, and a pair of **Mountain Peltops**. We walked back up the road enjoying a stunning sunset.

Back at the mission we were treated to a “mu-mu”, a slow roast in which the meat is wrapped in banana-leaves and buried with hot stones for several hours. This was doubly-good fortune for us, because the meat “belonged” to the pig that had kept us awake for the last two nights. Very tasty it was too. It became apparent over dinner that the issues in Satop had not been resolved – they were still debating our visit, presumably failing to understand that with our departure imminent and irreversible, no decision from them automatically implied a negative one. We were lucky that we had scored pretty-much all of our high altitude species on the first day (though dipping on Blue-capped Ifrita was a sore point), but missing the chance of a close-up encounter with the Parotia was another *major* disappointment.

13/7

With the Parotia out of bounds, Steve and I decided to stake out the Mag BoP display court again. No-one else was interested in joining us in our pre-dawn walk back down to Matthew’s place, across the stream and up the now familiar trail by torch-light. Well before dawn we were installed in the tiny makeshift hide.

As dawn broke Emperor BoP activity in the display tree directly above us commenced and it was frustrating and tantalising to hear a raucous display going on so close but completely invisible. For over two hours we sat in virtual silence being eaten by mosquitos until eventually we gave up. The Mag BoP had clearly been spooked the day before and was presumably at some other court instead, perhaps where Steve and I had heard (and seen) the bird yesterday. Again we also heard Red-bellied Pitta but not nearly as close as the previous day. In the end we left the hide dejected. Steve threatened to take revenge by having a dump on its display court, but settled for a photo and a quick pit-stop elsewhere in the forest. As we went to clamber up the slope the Pitta called again and we went back into the hide for another 10min in vain hope.

A **Chestnut-bellied Fantail** barely livened up proceedings, but finding a cracking **Dwarf Whistler** certainly did bring smiles back to our faces, and this turned out to be the only one of the trip. Joining up with the others I was gripped off to learn they’d had a Red-bellied Pitta on the track as they ascended to meet us. Not counting the half-blind Mr Magoo, I was the only participant not to have seen one now. Close to the previous day’s lookout we found a few more birds, most notably **Double-eyed Fig-Parrots**, and **Ornate Fruit-Doves** (the others had seen these yesterday but I only ticked it off with good views today) and our first **Western Black-capped Lorys** (we had seen several Eastern in Alotau, but birds in the Huon are of the Western species). A White-crowned Koel was heard, and we also added **Green-backed Gerygone** and **Friiled Monarch**.

Back at the Mission a **Long-tailed Buzzard** flew by eerily in the fog which was descending around us and would blight our birding for the rest of the day. Early afternoon we were back up above Gatop hoping for Superb BoP which had thus far eluded us, but visibility was poor. A break in the mist allowed excellent views of a pair of displaying **Great Cuckoo-Doves**, our best views of **Eastern Riflebird**, but yet again Red-bellied Pitta stayed on the [heard only] list. When one called close to the road Steve and I dived down the steep embankment into thick jungle but emerged with nothing. It was rapidly becoming my bogey bird.

On our last night at the mission in Gatop we were presented with gifts of hand-woven baskets and shell necklaces by our hosts, and unexpected and touching gesture. Surely it was us, the comparatively rich western guests, who should giving gifts.

14/7

The schedule for the next morning did not allow for any dawn birding as we had to pack up and head straight down to the airstrip in Wasu where a charter flight was due to whisk us to Madang. We endured a worrying hour long wait for the charter to arrive, enlivened only by a fly past of 30 or so **Torresian Imperial Pigeons**. As the small craft swung out over Astrolabe Bay it was depressing to see the slicks of top soil spewing from almost every river-mouth, a tell-tale sign of deforestation above.

We landed without drama at Madang, enjoying the curious sight of a super-yacht in the bay as we lined up our approach. We now had another long wait for our lift. When he did finally arrive he took us to the local tourist office for another long wait while the driver tried to locate Moyang, owner of the famous Keki Lodge, who had given up waiting for us and had gone off elsewhere in Madang. A trip tick arrived in the form of a **Meliphaga** (so impressed was I with this honeyeater tick that I have completely forgotten what on earth it was), but eventually after over an hour the driver returned with Moyang and we finally thought we were on our way. No, wait: he had some errands to run in Madang. Quite why he hadn't bothered to do all this in the three hours while waiting around for us we couldn't begin to fathom other than the usual TIPNG; there is *never* any hurry here.

After a final stop for some beer (there was no room for ice with people and luggage squashed into the back of the land-rover to bursting point) we were finally on our way. Steve and I drew the long straws so we got to sit up front with the driver in relative luxury for the 2 hours up the coast highway followed by another hour on the final 15km stretch up into the Adelberts along a poor, privately maintained track. Brief views of a **Comb-crested Jacana** on a lake as we left the village added one to the trip list.



Ten years in the planning, 12 flights, countless bumpy 4x4 miles, 3.15pm on day 22 of the trip and we had finally arrived. Situated in a clearing at 800m elevation, surrounded by stunning primary forest as far as the eye can see, the lodge comprised a few pretty thatched cottages. Steve and I hastily erected our mosquito nets, set out our sleeping mats and bags and emerged into the clearing

with our optics. Moyang pointed out a huge fig tree almost directly above our hut. Steve's jaw dropped when he explained that this was *the* best place to see FMBB, as it regularly visits the tree to feed during the day.

Within 10min we had heard an unfamiliar rasping call, then Chris noticed something fly in behind the big fig. Steve went off to investigate and as he scanned up into the canopy suddenly blurted out "I've got it! Oh my fucking Christ I've got it!!". I rushed over but found his directions "it's in the tree" a trifle ambiguous in the middle of a primary rainforest. Nevertheless soon I too was grilling our most wanted quarry as it posed in perfect light, the fantastic orange/red fire mane, yellow wing flashes and beady white eye against an all-black body giving it a slightly threatening look. After minute or two it flew off out of sight, and we hugged each other, cracked open a warm beer each and even shed a tear or two of joy and no little relief. Suddenly Billy appeared wondering what the fuss was about. Shit! We had been so wrapped up in watching that we hadn't even noticed he wasn't with us, still inside sorting out his bedding. What a disaster! He seemed remarkably calm, I guess fairly confident that if we could find it within 10mins of arrival there was a decent chance it would be back in the next day and a half, but I could only imagine the torment if Billy and Steve had swapped places.



We spent the rest of the remaining time before dark viewing from the clearing, noting our first **Sulphur-crested Cockatoos** since Alotau, **Eclectus Parrot**, three **Western Black-capped Lorys**, **Sacred Kingfisher**, three **Dollarbirds**, **Blyth's Hornbill**, **Yellow-bellied Sunbird**, **Red-chested Flowerpecker**, **Hooded Butcherbird**, **Pinon Imperial Pigeon** and **Grey Crow**. **Boyer's Cuckoo Shrike** was a new addition to the trip list. As the evening drew on several **Vulturine Parrots** flew to roost, then another great spot from eagle-eyed Steve picked out a **Hook-billed Kingfisher**, silhouetted beautifully and atmospherically at dusk.

We enjoyed a decent meal cooked by Moyang's wife and got ourselves ready for bed, but as we turned in we could hear the curious whistles and popping of a Marbled Frogmouth in the forest behind the huts. We came back out onto the landing to see that MvB was already out preparing his tape and torch. Sadly a 30min foray into the forest yielded a couple of vocal duels with a Marbled Frogmouth, but no sightings.

15/7

Another morning, but for once a relative lie in, one of the great virtues of staying right in the forest. We assembled on the lawn around 7am then followed Moyang down into the forest some 400m until he indicated we were under a **Lesser Bird of Paradise** display tree. This was another great bird to see, especially for once without a long walk or drive, though as we had come to expect, they were not easy to see high up in the canopy.

After breakfast back at the huts we made our way back in to the lower trail where we were after some of the other local specialties. A Banded Yellow Robin wouldn't cooperate, with only Steve and Chris getting any kind of view, and then we had an extended tape duel with a **Brown-capped Jewel Babbler**. The corking mega-skulker with a thin, high-pitched monosyllabic call moved around us for nearly an hour. I had brief views of its long thin shape moving stealthily in the dark undergrowth at some range, and then finally had decent flight views as it flew at speed across the track literally meters from where we stood.

Taking a break from the dark trails back at the clearing we noted various interesting birds flying around the fruiting trees, including two male and a female **Fire-maned Bowerbird**, one or two young and female **Lesser Bird of Paradise**, and I also picked out a female **Magnificent Bird of Paradise**. As well as a similar cast to the previous afternoon, we also had **Dwarf Koel**, **Meyer's Friarbird**, **Spot-winged Monarch**, **Rufous-bellied Kookaburra**, **Papuan Black Honeyeater**, **Zoe Imperial Pigeon** and a fantastic fly-past of an **Oriental Hobby**, caught on my DSLR taking an eating a dragonfly on the wing.



During lunch we considered the options for the afternoon. Some were keen on grabbing a nap after a long tour, while Steve wanted to maximise his time in the clearing to try for good digiscoped pictures of the Bowerbird. Myself, I was still smarting from not seeing the "easiest" pitta, Red-bellied. Mark agreed to let me take the iPod and speaker and I announced to the others I would go off alone. But my heart sank when Helmut asked if he could come too. I could hardly say no, but I feared that this would diminish my chances. I knew for certain that I could not count on the extra pair of eyes.

We descended quietly towards the stream where a mud-map indicated R-B is occasionally seen, and I found a spot that gave a decent view but provided some cover and sat down. There was no sign after a couple of minutes, so I gave a short whistle from the iPod and waited. No response. I tried again with a little more volume but still no response. With nothing doing after 20 minutes I decided to move back up the trail and probably knock it on the head. About half-way up, thinking I had heard the faintest background mournful whistle, I stopped. I played the iPod one more time and this



time it was answered, albeit very faintly. We moved back down to where we'd been again and tried to tempt it closer. This seemed to work as the response became slightly stronger, though I was by now sufficiently familiar with it to realise it was almost certainly closer than it sounded so I began to scan with bins with care and determination. I knew it would have to be me that found it, and I even felt some confidence that I would. Then, on a fallen log on the other side of the stream, partly obscured by foliage, there was a **Red-bellied Pitta**, enough of the bird exposed for me to make out brown head and blue breast, and to observe that it was much scruffier than I'd expected of such a bright, smart bird. Quietly, without taking my bins from it, I tried to give Helmut directions. After about 30 seconds it flew up out of sight and called again from deep cover. I turned and grinned at Helmut who smiled back. Phew, I thought, he got it! "I saw movement"... Oh no, the poor old bugger had got onto it just in time for it to fly off.

We stayed on in the hope of more or better views and I observed something fly across the stream and go into cover above us. Again I scanned carefully and through the dense foliage I was able to make out a small red patch. When the movement of the patch correlated perfectly with the bird singing I knew this was it, but getting a better view from here was impossible so we waited some more until it crossed back to the far side of the stream. Again I felt supremely confident of finding it, and again with meticulous scanning I locked onto it in the fork of a tree directly ahead. This was a better view than the first and I was even able to get Helmut onto it. Once it had gone I felt a great rush of jubilation and relief. This was tempered by the news that Helmut had just got his camcorder onto it, but had not yet pressed record when it flew. Doddering old fool! Ah well. The bird had been tormented enough and I fancied looking for something else now anyway. I bounded, delighted, up the track to where the others were all either resting or scanning from the clearing and had been eavesdropping on the action. The bird, clearly worked up into a frenzy by the fake intruder, continued to call for another 15 minutes after we had gone.

After a while in the clearing I decided to head into the forest behind the huts to try again for Banded Yellow Robin. Chris joined me and we took the approach of just simply sitting in a bit of cover and waiting to see what we might. In the end, nothing! Some Catbirds hissed obtrusively nearby but we didn't see them (and indeed didn't know the call until the following morning).



As the evening drew in I “showered” in the stream, reliving my outstanding encounter with the pitta, and then enjoyed another decent meal courtesy of Moyang’s wife. Now it was time for some spotlighting, and tonight we headed out towards the main track. We heard a couple of Hook-billed Kingfishers but couldn’t tempt one closer, and also Papuan Boobook and Papuan Frogmouth both called but wouldn’t play ball. At least 3-4 Marbled Frogmouth were making their truly bizarre calls, ending with a descending set of bubbling notes and a plop, just like plucking your cheek with a finger.

Wandering back and forth, Mark swept his torch repeatedly through the trees in the hope of picking



up eye reflections until in another apparently random sweep he stopped and said “there it is”. We locked onto a gorgeous Marbled Frogmouth only 15m or so from the track on an open branch just about head height. We watched for a few minutes with it apparently undisturbed I decided to risk going back for my camera. Returning only 5min later it was still present and I snapped away, initially without flash, then with the camera’s built flash which was reasonably effective at that range. Having filled my boots with pics we left the cracker in peace and carried on up the track. Another hour or so and we heard the same four species more, but no further sightings of anything, until we decided to call it a night. I realised at this point that Steve had already sloped off to bed.

As we walked back past the Frogmouth site I wondered aloud if it was still present. Mark brandished his torch a final time and shone it in. It had gone – but incredibly

there was another now even closer to where we stood. It posed superbly and I ran off another set of crippling photos, two of which ended up published in Nigel Cleere’s “Handbook of Nightjars of the World”. One of the highlights of the trip.

16/7

Next morning in the pre-dawn I was up preparing for the final morning’s birding. Not wanting to get caught short in the forest during a BoP vigil or similar, I made my way by torch-light to the “cabin” with the hole in the ground. While the previous night it had been clear, now the stench was overwhelming and I soon realised why. Someone in the camp obviously had a dodgy tummy and even dodgier aim. Diarrhoea had been splattered everywhere. I just about managed to find

somewhere to plant my feet so I could squat without getting covered in shit, did my worst, then got the hell out.

We spent the early part of the morning trying to coax some Catbirds to show. As had happened once or twice, the “battle” between Mark and the birds became personal. After a significant period without luck, and hearing a Magnificent Bird of Paradise calling from what seemed to be the vicinity of the upper trail, I silently left the group and stationed myself alone. Yesterday’s unexplained but ultimately justified confidence in my own ability for some reason continued and again this confidence led to better field craft and more focused, concentrated searching and again I was rewarded. Male and female **Magnificent Bird of Paradise** were located high in the canopy. Though I only enjoyed a few seconds of good views, again I had the huge satisfaction of having done the hard work myself.

Our lift was due late morning but, surprise, surprise, failed to show on time. It transpired that Moyang had already paid the driver, much to Mark’s incredulity, and we became increasingly concerned that he had simply done a runner and we would have no way of getting to Madang in time for our flight to Port Moresby.

With most of our stuff packed we simply waited in the clearing. No new species were added, but I managed some photos of FMBB in flight and further a young male FMBB put in an appearance, initially causing some scratching of heads as it sports the striped brown under of a female, but the brilliant orange mane of the male.



In the nick of time, and three hours later than scheduled, our driver arrived. We jammed ourselves into the landrover, accompanied by a couple of hangers on, and began the three hour journey back

to Madang. A change of drivers was called for it became clear our man was falling asleep on the precarious track down the mountain. Mark took over and got us safely back to Madang just in time, For once we had good fortune with Air Niugini. Though our flight had been cancelled, the one before ours had been delayed and was only now just departing, and they were able to get us on it; a huge relief.

On the final evening of the trip we enjoyed an excellent meal at a Chinese restaurant in Port Moresby, and discovered that Mark still had one last birding trip – to the famous Varirata – planned for the following morning. With SMRY under the weather and reluctant to commit himself, I was in two minds.

17/7

By the time I went to bed the previous evening I had persuaded myself that it made sense to push my tired body one last time. I arrived for another excellent cooked breakfast at 4.30 to welcome smiles from Chris and Billy, glad that I was making the journey with them.

The journey to Varirata took about an hour and half and we arrived just before dawn in the main clearing where a **Large-tailed Nightjar** was calling. As we peered in the semi-darkness, again I had the feeling that I would find it, and sure enough as I peered into the gloom with bins there it was, lying on horizontal branch about 15m away. Nice!

A walk through the forest produced more goodies. First, one of my main targets for the morning, **Brown-headed Paradise Kingfisher**. What a little beauty. He posed wonderfully for us but the light was poor and he was too distant for SLR photography. I stupidly had my digiscoping settings wrong, and in any case my adaptor was still broken so the pics were hand-held.



A Painted Quail-thrush called tantalisingly but would not show, and we located a male/female pair of **Papuan King Parrots** in the canopy. Next stop was the **Raggiana Bird of Paradise** display tree. As we had experienced elsewhere, even though these are bright gaudy birds, and you know the exact tree they are in, it can still be tough to see them. With patience eventually we got great views of several males, including photos, even if we never witnessed full display.

Our local guide had reported that another target, **Barred Owlet-Nightjar** was not present in his usual tree when he checked it out first thing, but on the off chance we checked it out again and lo-and-behold, there he was, head poking out of a hole in a tree right next to the main road in/out of the park. Magic! The guide also knew of another stakeout and we decided to check that one out too, scoring two out of two. It posed well for photos before we decided it was time to be heading back to Port Moresby to prepare for the flights home.

Steve was surprisingly relaxed, working on his notes, though guessed (and was right) that he would be gripped off at some later date when he would wonder why he hadn't pushed himself one more time as I had. Indeed I hadn't felt much like going, but the thought of the missed opportunity when cosily back in England had swayed it for me.

We had finally reached the end of our adventure. It had been a tough trip filled with highs and lows, but we had finished on a real high, and the top two birds of the trip had performed brilliantly. But now that our New Guinea appetites were well and truly whet, it was surely now a case of when, not if, we would return to do the central highlands and lowlands, or West Papua, or both, one day.

