

West Papua, July 2018

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On July 11th, 2018, I started an amazing, bucket-list trip to West Papua, a place filled with arguably the most incredible birdlife on the planet. Long-time birding buddy Steve Young and I have been talking about such a trip for a long time, and I started thinking even more seriously about it when I came to Australia a few years ago. Which is weird, because the geographical proximity doesn't actually work out at simpler logistics or even much less flying time. It may seem close, but West Papua is actually a bugger to get to from anywhere!

If you have a great deal of time and supreme birding skill, perhaps it's possible to "do" West Papua independently (see, eg Ross and Melissa Gallardy's [blog](#)). But for mere mortals like me, there are really only 2 options when it comes to birding in West Papua. One is to book with a bird tour company. But this is expensive, means travelling with a group of other punters who may or may not be good companions, and fixes the itinerary — a typical trip is either a 4 week extravaganza, or a 2 week highlights trip. The shorter trip appeals more to me because I doubt I can justify a month away from home or work, but any such trip would miss key sites. The second option is to go semi-independent, with a group mates on a self-designed itinerary. This is what we choose in the end: we book a private trip with Shita Prativi, who is the best in the business when it comes to local logistics in West Papua. Even this option is not cheap by 3rd world standards, but the trip with a small group for 3 weeks still comes in cheaper than a 12-day Birdquest trip of 8 punters, for instance. Of course we will not have the benefit of an experienced world-birder like Mark Van Bieirs or Rob Hutchinson leading and finding birds for us. But personally I am excited by the extra challenge. True, we might miss some stuff, but I enjoy the extra preparation required (downloading mp3s from xeno-canto, making sure I have all the kit for playback, sorting out torch for night-birding, reading up on id and logistics in trip reports, etc) and I look forward to the extra satisfaction of finding more birds for ourselves.

Day 0, 11/7/18, "On my way"

My trip starts in Adelaide with a flight to Perth where I do a couple of days work preparing for a conference I am running there in December. This is convenient because Perth, unlike Adelaide, has a direct flight to Jakarta. I leave Perth on 11th and arrive in Jakarta late evening after a 5 hour flight. Now I have a wait of nearly 24 hours. Though I have toyed with the idea of birding Jakarta —

and there are some goodies to be had in a day trip — I am unable to organise a guide for the day, so instead I sit in an airport hotel getting some work done as my birding companions wing their way from London Heathrow. Steve Young is the reason I became a birder and we have birded together abroad since our first long-weekend trip to Spain in 1999, nearly 20 years ago now (scary when I put it like I that). The third member of the team is Jon Porter, a Welsh school-teacher whom I first met in Scotland 16 years ago when Steve and I did the highlands in our “Grouse and Raptors” trip in 2002 (see Steve’s [report](#)). In fact that was also the last time I’d seen Jon!



West Papua is not easy to get to, even if it is only 4.5 hours due north of home

After meeting the UK 2/3rds of the team in Jakarta airport soon after their flight touches down, we explore the domestic portion of the terminal hoping to kill the next few hours in a bar. But to our horror we discover that the airport is dry. We will not get a beer for nearly a week. Eek!

Day 1, 12/7/18, “Meet the parents”

Our overnight flight from Jakarta arrives as scheduled at 6am into Sentani, a satellite town to the main city Jayapura, West Papua’s capital, situated at the north-eastern extremity of West Papua. The New Guinea lowlands are hot and sticky — it is already 30 degrees!



We have been in the air as England have been playing Croatia in the World Cup semi, but the extra time loss for England is not one we are excited to discover on arrival. We meet our local contact and give him some of our gear for safe-keeping (the baggage allowance for our next flight is a meagre 15kg) then board for another 50 minute flight to Wamena in the Baliem Valley. This valley in the central highlands of West Papua, also known as the “Grand Valley”, was incredibly only “discovered” by westerners in the 1930s.

In Wamena we meet up for the first time with the fantastic duo who will be our guides, keep us fed and out of trouble and generally look after us for the next 3 weeks, Shita Prativi and Benny Mambrasr. Shita has been organising trips for birding in West Papua for 14 years and no one knows how to sort out the logistics of this tricky country better than her. She's done it for Birdquest, Birdtour Asia, Rockjumper and even Jared Diamond and Tim Laman. Her side-kick Benny is a converted hunter from Waigeo, still learning his trade as a birder, but with an amazing hunter's eye and instinct for finding the "prey".

We load up the Hilux and drive up to our camp at 3500m overlooking Lake Habema. Of course we bird en route, finding a couple of extremely range-restricted birds in the process, **Baliem Whistler** and **Black-breasted Mannikin** in grasslands and gardens outside Wamena.

A key target before we get too high is **Superb Bird-of-Paradise**, a stunner with an amazing blue breast-band that Steve and I had heard regularly in the Huon Peninsula a decade ago but which back then steadfastly refused to show itself. Today we find one at Shita's regular site outside Wamena but are unable to grab any kind of image on our CCDs.

More cooperative are the stunning (though common) **Western Crested Berrypecker**, a couple of high altitude honeyeaters, **Common Smoky Honeyeater** and **Belford's Melidectes** (big, bold, loud common and conspicuous) and a couple of nice robins, **Sub-alpine Robin** and **White-winged Robin**.



We find another range-restricted goody, **Snow Mountain Tiger Parrot**, feeding quietly by the roadside shortly before we arrive at the makeshift camp that will be our base for the next 4 nights.



The camp, overlooking Lake Habema, has been constructed by locals the day before and comprises a large wooden frame lashed together and covered in tarpaulins. Out the back is our “long drop” toilet. Jon goes to inspect and returns with the news that it would be better termed a short-drop and he fears he may have filled it up already.



It will be cold – very cold – overnight, so we rug up. Steve and Jon, suffering from jet-lag, have a very restless night barely managing a wink of sleep. Here at Lake Habema I am almost directly north of Adelaide – a direct flight would take about 5 hours – so although it has taken me more than 14 hours on 4 separate flights to get here, at least my body is adapted to the timezone, if not the altitude. I manage a few hours of restless sleep until woken by the locals who, under the influence of some smuggled in moonshine, have a loud and very serious argument at 3am. The next morning we find out that the insults have escalated and machetes were drawn.

Day 2, 13/7/18, Our first full day in West Papua

As will become the norm over the next 3 weeks, we rise pre-dawn at 5am (in fact this will be a late rise). We are expecting a minimalist breakfast but incredibly the locals, supplied by Shita’s planning and shopping (and of course our wallets), have used their simple fire in the other tent to prepare a full breakfast that includes omelettes and pancakes, which we wash down with hot, sweet, 3-in-1 “coffee”.

It is still dark when we arrive at the start of the famous Ibele Trail. As recently as 10 years ago this whole area was pristine montane forest, and we imagine dripping with birds of paradise, but now there has been extensive logging — the worst over the last 6 years — and we are saddened at times to hear chainsaws over the next few days. The Ibele Trail is just about the only spot that retains decent forest and we will spend the next 3-4 days walking down and back up this steep, muddy trail in the mossy cloud forest that leads to the isolated and traditional village of Ibele, several km below. We are all grateful for the wellies we have brought and barely change out of them for the next 4 days.



We dip on any night/dawn birds but once it is light we spend some time at the top of the trail scanning below us. Immediately we are rewarded as a pair of stonking **MacGregor's Honeyeaters** glide across and feed in the tops of lichen-moss covered trees. Formerly classified as a Bird of Paradise, we agree that irrespective of the DNA it looks like no other honeyeater and really deserves still to be a BoP. Massive rounded wings make a rushing sound as the flap that we can hear across the valley, and its outrageous golden-orange wattles stand out like beacons. A cracking start.



We trudge down the trail, descending maybe 500m over 1-2km where we spend much of the next 3 hours hunting out some superb skulkers of the moss forest. First up, Benny hears a **Lesser Melampitta**. As we try to coax it into view a brown bird pops up next to a tree trunk and Steve is immediately on the case — **Lesser Ground Robin**. The Melampitta makes us work harder but we all snag cracking views of this black, velvety bird. Though our views are outstanding, they are brief and Steve and I have both opted for viewing rather than photography. Next up Benny hears a **Greater Ground Robin**. We are up for the challenge and spend the next 30mins tracking down the stonker which eventually yields excellent views to all.



To complete a set of skulking stonkers, a pair of **Papuan Logrunners** responds to our playback, eventually yielding brief, but at least tickable views for me. Meantime Steve's sharper reflexes and better field-craft have even produced a record shot.

In one of the more open areas, while we continue to try for the Logrunners a largish bird with white tail feather glides across the clearing distantly. I have enough on it to be able to tick off **Splendid Astrapia**, the key Bird of Paradise here in the Snow Mountains. It lands and Jon and I are straight onto it. It is dark but through my gorgeous 10x42 Swarovskis I can see the rich greens and odd facial pattern of the adult male. It's too distant for me even to bother going for the camera and even worse, Steve can't get on it before it drops out of sight.

Late morning we are starting to turn our attention to our rumbling tummies and trudge back up the trail. We reach the vehicle just as it starts to rain in earnest and when we get back to camp Shita (who has stayed to sort out last night's fracas and make sure it doesn't happen again) is relieved to hear we've had such an outstanding morning because a few km away at the camp it has been pissing down since dawn.

After an early lunch we rest a bit. Steve and Jon, weary from consecutive overnight flights and a sleepless machete-laden first night at 3500m a.s.l., doze longer than me, and I stroll along the road near the camp. Numerous scrubby flowering bushes are a magnet for honeyeaters and I grab images of **Orange-cheeked Honeyeater**, **Sooty Honeyeater** and **Short-bearded Melidectes**, all high altitude specialists – though as I write this I discover that I have somehow unaccountably lost all my images from this afternoon. Arrrghhh!

With sleeping beauties awake again by mid/late afternoon, we decide to drive along the road beyond the camp where Shita and Benny often have Astrapias. We are blighted by the weather though. Even when it is not raining the forest is in deep mist and visibility wretched. It gets dark quickly and early, but we do have one more treat in store. As we drive back to camp there is a thumping on the roof. Standing in the ute tray, Benny has seen a **Snow Mountain Quail**. We pile out in time to see it flush off down the valley. A few hundred metres on and there's that banging again. This time we see 2 quail shuffle across the road and disappear down the slope.



So we end the day with a short but not-too-shabby list of birds: MacGregor's Honeyeater, Splendid Astrapia, both Greater and Lesser Ground Robin, Lesser Melampitta, Papuan Logrunner, Snow Mountain Quail and a bunch of nice honeyeaters. The trip is off to a flier.

Day 3, 14/7/18, "A wader and a duck"

We make an even earlier start to try to connect with a nightjar or woodcock back at the top of the Ibele Trail. We hear nothing until it is already getting light, when we hear a **New Guinea Woodcock**, one of our most wanted. But it is deep in a thicket, not making its flight call but instead making grunting noise that we learn from Shita it makes as it roosts. At our behest, a couple of the locals go in to search – either they will find it on the deck for stunning views, or worst case, flush it. As it turns out we have miscalculated the worst case. The locals fail on both counts, but in a desperate measure we head in ourselves. It promptly flushes low around the valley and some distance away. In the dense thicket we see nothing and are alerted by the locals and guides who tell us it has flown. Bugger! Sigh! If you want a job doing...

We put the dip behind us. The weather looks better today, and we begin birding the Ibele Trail with expectations that it might be even better today than yesterday. We are again mistaken: it is much quieter and harder work. We find **Lesser Melampitta** again, and I claw back **Rufous-naped Bellbird** which showed well yesterday but I missed. We then spend a long time at the small clearing with a view up to fruiting trees where we'd seen the adult male Astrapia the previous day. We find a female/immature, but no male. The Logrunners do not respond to playback. And then have a series of near misses and if-onlys. Shita sees a female Brown Sicklebill but it stays put for only a few seconds and none of us gets onto it. We think that the strange rasping we hear from the top of a fruiting tree might be the rare and elusive **Archbold's Bowerbird**, and at one point a large, all-dark, long-tailed bird bombs out from the vicinity but none of us gets enough on it to be sure. We see a similar collection of the commoner birds from yesterday: **Orange-billed Lorikeet**, **Plum-face**

Lorikeet, **Belford's Melidectes** and add **Brehm's Tiger Parrot** but at around 10.30 the weather has deteriorated and we decide we need a change of scene.

After an early lunch we decide on a trip down to the lake. We drive beyond the camp to a point near



the eastern edge of the lake. En route we screech to a halt as a small flock of Mannikins flies up from the roadside. We all pile out of the Hilux and track down a group of 4-5 of the extremely restricted **Snow Mountain (Western Alpine) Mannikin**.

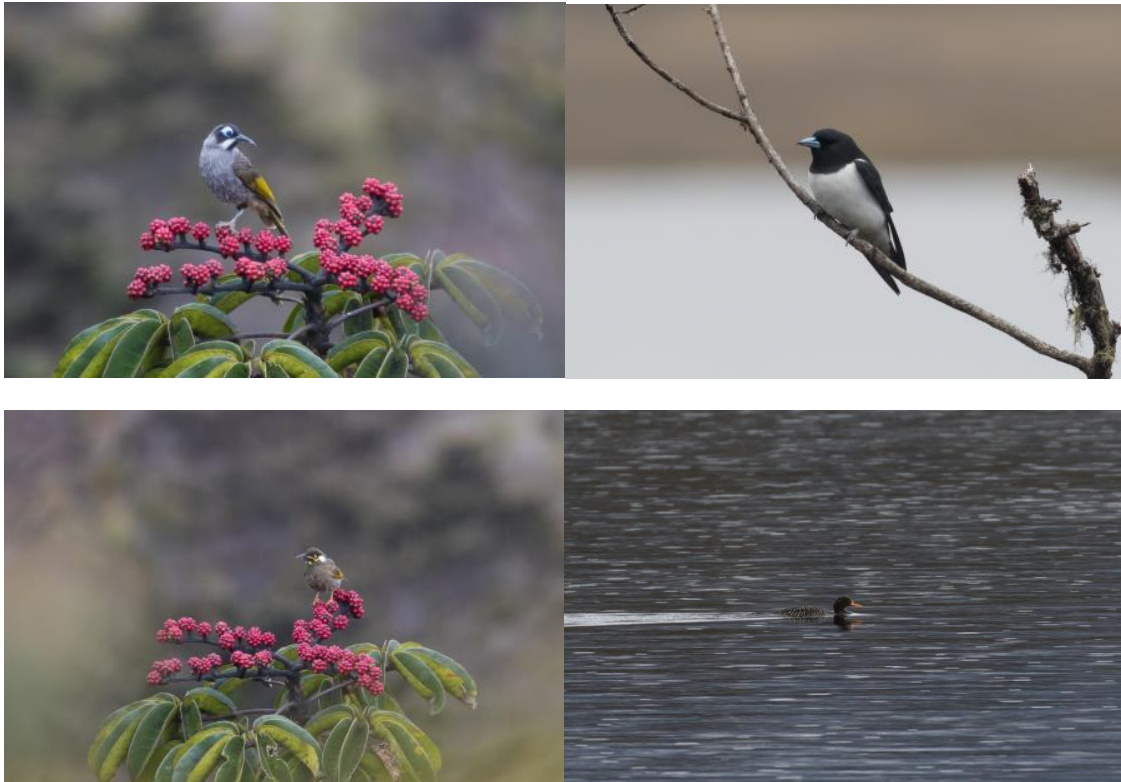
We then descend yet another steep trail towards Lake Habema, though this one is mercifully less muddy. **Black-throated Honeyeater** is new, and once we get to a decent viewing point we set up

scopes and grill every bird we can see on the water.



Disappointingly the first dozen birds are **Eurasian Coots**! But a few minutes later we lock onto a pair that seem just a little different and sure enough we have found **Salvadori's Teal**,

and intricately patterned torrent duck. Jon is especially gratified to connect, having dipped after several extended vigils on mountains streams in PNG in 2003. Scratching a 15 year itch is very satisfying. We carry on down to the water's edge for closer views of the Teal and also get better views of **Orange-cheeked Honeyeater** and **Black-throated Honeyeater** on the way as well as enjoying the change of scene from the Ibele Trail. A **Swamp Harrier** cruises the edge of the lake, one of the few raptors we have seen.



We are back at the camp in time to drive back to the Ibele Trail and sunset finds us staking out the clear area at the top of the trail yet again. A couple of silhouetted lorikeets are very distinctive from their ribbon tails: **Stella's Lorikeet**.

Benny stays up near the top of the trail but — probably too impatient — Steve, Jon and I wander down closer to where we think the Woodcock may have landed this morning. An *Astrapia* calls but we can't locate it and it doesn't respond to my playback. The temperature drops as the sun departs and, cold and disheartened by this morning's near miss, we are still hearing nothing. We decide to give it until 6.30. In need of some warmth and food we are about to walk up and tell Benny we are going to knock it on the head, when at 6.30 on the dot we hear the distinctive and quite unbirdlike display flight call of **New Guinea Woodcock**. We race uphill just in time for Benny to tell us it has just flown over his head. Double-bugger!

Fortunately it comes for a return journey and we have fantastic flight views of the rare endemic wader. As we walk back to the car victorious, mood flipped completely, we flush a Nightjar, which must be **Archbold's Nightjar**.

So we end Day 3 with very few new species, but we have added to the list of high altitude specials, including **Archbold's Nightjar**, **Snow Mountain Mannikin**, **Salvadori's Teal** and our bird of the day, **New Guinea Woodcock**. It will be even colder tonight, maybe even dipping below zero. We are learning why tour groups spend a number of days here — though there are few specialties, the forest does not yield its treasures easily.

Day 4, 15/7/18, "Let no man call this a bloody holiday"

Another morning, another trudge down (and of course back up) the Ibele Trail. We still have a few local specialties to get and we certainly put in the hard yards this morning but the birding gods are

not on our side – at least, they are not on Steve’s and my side, and instead on the other side of the trail, holding Jon’s hand...

We have tried repeatedly for Wattled Ploughbill, a bird that is often seen here, but have not had a sniff over the last 2.5 days and today will be no different. As one of the key targets, it is disappointing to dip on this bird, but we subsequently find out that groups after us also dip and it seems they are not present this year — perversely reassuring. Likewise I have played Blue-capped Ifrita on various occasions without success. Our first time down the trail 2 days ago we have had a snatch of song that sounded to us like a direct response, but then nothing else, and the longer it goes, the easier it is to dismiss that as a mistake.

We spend from 7am to 1pm on the trail, and have a few more encounters with commoner birds, such as **Plum-faced Lorikeet**, **Rufous-naped Bellbird**, **Belford’s Melidectes**. Steve is also able to claw back views of male **Splendid Astrapia**, rectifying a hole in his list. He has been remarkably calm outwardly so far, but I know how much it will have been gnawing at him. This time we all get on it, though I only manage just after it has shuffled a foot to the left and is now partially obscured.

There are two other birds we target today. First up, **Bi-colored Mouse-warbler**. There is a bird here at the first clearing for sure, and twice during the day in response to playback we have a small brown bird zip past us too fast to get any detail on it. This is surely our quarry, but I am unhappy ticking these micro-second views. As we try to entice the Mouse-warbler back, we hear a **Melampitta** again then suddenly it appears on a tree-root next to the trail. I fire off 3 shots. These are nicely exposed, but horribly motion-blurred (I often use a low ISO and slow shutter-speed – sometimes, maybe more often than I deserve, I get lucky and one shot will be stable. That’s all you need and the stable one will be low noise, nicely detailed, etc). But in these conditions where the views are fleeting and the chances few, I have learned a lesson: better to have a sharp(ish) but dark picture than a nicely exposed one that can never be resurrected). Steve’s pics are dark but much sharper than mine so we can rescue them in Lightroom. Much as it goes against the grain, I switch to auto-ISO for the rest of the trip.



Next, we descend the trail further than we have been previously for our second main target. It gets even steeper and wetter and the trail narrows with steep bushes and large trees either side affording no view. At times it feels like we are walking down a cliff face. Eventually we find a slightly flatter part with moss covered boughs and a stream nearby. Good habitat for **Chestnut Forest Rail**. We play the call and wait. A few minutes later, we hear it, then again, closer! It's coming! Then it goes silent. We maintain our guard because this could mean it's on the move. Suddenly Jon, who is standing facing away from us looking down a narrow gully, without moving a muscle whispers, "I've got it". The stonker is on a log about 5m in front of him in the open. We shape to move cautiously over, but instantly it has gone, flashing across the track. Or at least, that's what Benny tells me – I see nothing.

It calls again from my side of the trail and appears to be looping around, once more getting close in response to our gently modulated playback. Now incredibly close it is making a pulsing croak. Steve and I peer into the tangle of roots and branches covered in moss fully expecting it will pop up for a second or so a mere 2m in front of us. That is all we need. We make no sound and no movement. Yet unaccountably, suddenly there is a sharp noise, I see a shape flit across a sunlit window and then it calls, now from much further away. We have missed it.

Over the next few hours we try again and hear it two or three times more – we can't tell if it's the same or a different bird, but whichever is true, we get no more strong interest and eventually the weather closes in. We could conceivably try again tomorrow, but we both know that we probably won't have time to walk the trail again, or even want to. This is probably our first major dip. We do have one more new bird – as we prepare to walk back up the trail a different looking bird appears in a fruiting tree. We grill it and get a few record shots, enough for us to conclude this is a female **Crested Satinbird**.

In the afternoon we once again bird along the road. More relaxing but nothing new, though we do find family of **Snow Mountain Quail** bringing to 7 the number we have seen. Rather than flying they scuttle off into the roadside scrub. Benny and I follow on foot and I find a couple still quite close. They give great views but are never in the open for the photo I crave. Amazingly two flush from behind Benny – he has walked right past them.

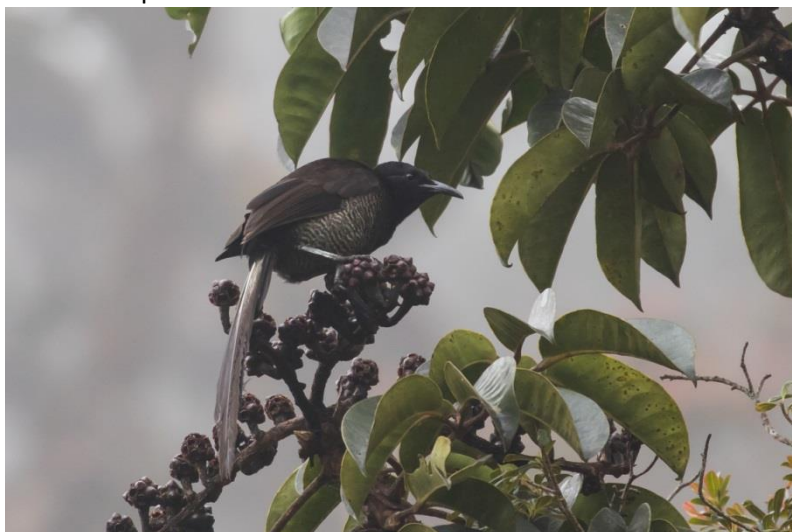
We finish the day by at the start of the Ibele Trail again. I have persuaded Jon and Steve to come looking for Archbold's Nightjar. We hear a **Spotless Crane** which would be a lifer for both Jon and Steve (I see them regularly at a few of my local wetlands near Adelaide) but it's now dark, and I can't coax it closer to a point we could get it in my torch. We fail to find the nightjar and knock it on the head. We have one more cold, hard, uncomfortable night to endure before some respite in a hotel tomorrow night!



Day 5, 16/7/18, "In which your intrepid team discover the joys of alcohol-free beer in Wamena..."

As intimated yesterday, a more dedicated team would have been down the trail again, flogging their minds and bodies one more time in the hope of a cute little orange thingy. But we are soft, have a few extra minutes in bed, and then help break camp. For the first time since we have been here the mountains opposite peek out from the clouds and we see the roof of Australasia. Snow Mountain Robin lives up there, but we will not go for it (nor do most).

While Shita, Benny and the locals pack stuff into the vehicles, we bird the road again, finding **Short-bearded Melidectes** and a female **Splendid Astrapia**. The Hilux arrives and we bid goodbye to Lake Habema. We spend the rest of the morning and until mid-afternoon birding the road on the way back to Wamena, targetting a few species that are found a little bit lower than our camp. I had thought that the roadside birding would be a welcome relief from the slog of the trail, but the forest here is badly degraded by logging, makeshift camps dot the road, and the depressing sound of chainsaws is an almost constant companion. We stop whenever there is slightly better forest away from a camp.



Our first such stop is quite birdy. Several **Snow Mountain Tiger Parrots** are vocal above us and we find a couple of **MacGregor's Honeyeater**, and a very confiding **Splendid Astrapia**. **Black Sitella** is a target this morning and after a couple of fly-overs eventually a flock of 5-6 settles in the top of a tree, distant but affording decent

scope views. **Plum-faced** and **Orange-billed Lorikeets** give us our best views of the week, and we also find **White-winged Robin** and **Sooty Honeyeater**.

From 10am the weather starts to deteriorate as mist rolls in. **Hooded Cuckooshrike** responds to our playback by singing once or twice, but never close enough to see in what is now <50m visibility. More cooperative are **Alpine Pipit** and **Papuan Treecreeper** both of which pose for photos.



Over lunch we have a surreal encounter – a van passes, stops and then reverses so that an angry man can accost Shita. The three of us tourists ignore this and hope it will pass. Later Shita explains that he has aggressively demanded payment for us birding in the National Park. Shita explains that we have all the necessary permissions and that the Park doesn't start for another 10km – we are outside. She also points out the tragic irony and deep hypocrisy of berating us for birding in a National Park, when all around we can hear the chainsaws of people destroying the forest. It is not fully resolved by the time he drives off, and Shita will have to visit the administrative offices when we get to Wamena to fix it.

After lunch we descend further and spend more time at the spot we'd observed Superb BoP on the way up. It takes quite some time, but eventually we get decent views again (but still no pics) of the (Greater) **Superb Bird of Paradise**. We also find **Ornate Melidectes** and **Black-breasted Mannikin**. Everywhere in New Guinea is owned by someone, and just looking at stuff on someone's land can get the owner irate (Steve and I witnessed this to our major detriment in the Huon Peninsula 10 ears ago). So when some locals ask us what we are doing and if we have permission from the elders, we realise it's time to leave.

The rooms of our hotel in Wamena – reputedly the best hotel in the town – are adequate, but feel like luxury compared to our basic accommodation of the previous 4 nights. I have my first shower in nearly a week, ping a few messages off now that I have some phone/data signal, and then find a spot down by the restaurant for a quiet beer with the lads. At least, that last part has been looming large in the imagination until we discover that the whole of Wamena is dry, and the hotel can't even get anything on the black market for us. Reception tell us they can get non-alcoholic beer. We decide its worth the risk and order two each. Sadly, though the product has the right container and colour, and a vague fizz to it, that is pretty-much where the resemblance to beer stops.

Shita treats us to a fantastic meal of crayfish, the local delicacy caught up in Lake Habema! Tomorrow we will fly back to the hot, sticky lowlands. We will be staying near Nimbokrang, about two hours drive from Sentani, and all being well, we will arrive there just in time to say hello and goodbye to the Birdtour Asia crew who are about to replace us up in the mountains. It will be good to catch up with Rob Hutchinson who is leading the group, even if only for a few minutes.



Day 6, 17/7/18, "In transit"

We leave the highlands behind on a flight that is delayed to 10am. In Sentani we gather stuff that we left in storage (the Wamena flights have a 15kg checked bag weight restriction) and drop off some laundry. The three of us set out with our driver on the 2 hour journey to Nimbokrang, a lowland

village in the foothills of the Cyclops Mountains and close to some rare good quality lowland forest. Shita and Benny follow half an hour behind in a separate vehicle, first arranging some shopping which will include a treat for us.

We note some raptors from the car, including **Brahminy Kite** and **White-bellied Sea Eagle**, but otherwise it's a bird-free 2 hours. We are keen to catch Rob and the BTA punters before they leave Nimbokrang. Tomorrow they will head to Wamena themselves. All being well we will arrive in Nimbokrang about 20min before they are due to leave.

Irritatingly, all is not well. Our driver, confused about the destination, takes us to Jamil's homestay, the original and once-upon-a-time the only place birders stayed. It was Jamil who pioneered birding eco-tourism here. But we will be staying at his protege, Alex's place, some way out of town and closer to the forest where Alex has built a number of comfortable guest houses. Without Shita it takes us a while to realise the mistake, then when we do and are back in the car the driver gets lost trying to find a short-cut to Alex's. Several texts and a couple phone-calls later Shita has put him straight, but we arrive 30min later, by which time the BTA guys have gone. Steve and I are somewhat irrationally gripped off by this — we had both been looking forward to seeing Rob again after several years and annoyed that a cock-up has robbed us of a "Dr Livingstone, I presume" kind of moment. But let's face it, better to dip on RH than a key bird! The BTA punters were here not to see us but the birds, so it's understandable they haven't waited around. They are still hoping to use their final hours in Nimbokrang to connect with Victoria Crowned Pigeon. This is also one of our top targets and we are worried that they have not yet seen it.

We have lunch, then wait around as the heavens open. By 3.30 the rain has somewhat cleared and we walk down into the forest and up into a tower hide from where we have a marvellous view over the forest. The rain stopping coincides with the 4pm rush as bird activity picks up and we have an excellent 2 hours, enjoying the new avifauna of the lowlands and scoring a number of lifer iconic species.



We see a number of commoner birds like **Metallic Starling**, **Red-cheeked Parrot**, **Boyer's Cuckoo-shrike**, **Black-browed Triller**, **Black Sunbird**, **Dollarbird**, a few duller honeyeaters: **New Guinea Friarbird**, **Mimic Meliphaga**, **Streak-headed Honeyeater** and **Tawny-breasted Honeyeater**. Perhaps because of our elevated viewing position, pigeons and doves are represented in good numbers: **Brown Cuckoo-dove**, **Pinon Imperial Pigeon**, **Zoe's Imperial Pigeon**, **Orange-bellied Fruit-dove** and a cracking **Great Cuckoo-dove**. We also see a pair of **Channel-billed Cuckoos** flying past the tower, as well as a **Grey Goshawk**. None of these are lifers but it is refreshing to be building up a nice list of birds new for the trip.

But the real reason we are up here is to find some of the more special birds of the region. It doesn't take long before a couple of **Brown Lory** fly over. Benny picks them up first on call, then jizz. We are discovering that although he is still relatively inexperienced in the highlands of Wamena, he is coming into his own as a local guide now we are in more familiar territory. Because the space is limited in the tower we have only brought one scope with us. Steve has set it on a Fruit-dove and I am about to have a look when he snatches the (his ;-)) scope away. I am somewhat taken aback, but he is at work grilling something in the distance. When I see what he has found I realise it's completely understandable — he has managed to pick out a **Pale-billed Sicklebill**; one of the star attractions of Nimbokrang and one we had expected to work hard for. The direction of the sun and dense foliage behind it mean it's almost invisible, even in binoculars, so the view is not the best but hey, it's a Sicklebill!

Then in lovely light – though distant – a male **Lesser Bird of Paradise** flies across our view, a lifer target for Jon. His staggering yellow plumages seem to gather the evening sun as he bounds across the horizon from one fruiting tree to another. The BoP looked nice too. As the afternoon draws on we find another BoP perched up on an exposed stem of a palm: this our first **Twelve-wired BoP**, probably a young male or female. We hope for better encounters over the next few days.

The birding slows and afternoon turns into evening but we have had a refreshing couple of hours. The morning's delays and travel cock-up are forgotten and we return to the lodge where a cracking meal and our treat – an esky full of ice and cold beer – are waiting.

Day 7, 18/7/18, "In the court of the Crimson King"

When we planned the trip, originally I was not going to do the Lake Habema leg, instead aiming to join Jon and Steve in Nimbokrang. When the chance opened up to be away for three, instead of two and a bit weeks, I changed my travel and joined them right from the start, so in some respects the previous week has been a bit of a bonus, and in a funny sort of way, it almost feels like the real trip starts now. Certainly in terms of the really iconic species, today has been circled in red on the calendar as a potential block-buster.

We begin in the pre-dawn darkness, down near the tower hide, doing some owling. This has necessitated a 3.40am rise. I am especially keen for Papuan Hawk Owl, but our luck is not in. We hear a vague response to my playback but although the locals claim a young Hawk Owl responding, I am not convinced that the single note hoot is actually a Hawk Owl (whose normal call is a double note). On the other hand, I have no alternative theory for what it might be! Whatever it is, it refuses to come any closer. A few **Marbled Frogmouth** utter their bizarre bubbling call (followed by a pop that sounds for all the world like a finger plucking a cheek). As we leave, one flies across my torch beam, but disappears into the forest without landing. As good a bird as Marbled Frogmouth is, it's a non-lifer, non-endemic and we have bigger fish to fry.

We arrive while it's still dark at another tower hide that Alex has erected looking up to a display post. Worryingly there is a large group of birders gathered at the base. We've been assured that as the only group actually staying at Alex's we have some priority and were promised the top level of the hide. Hoping the assurances hold good, we push past the waiting punters, a group from the Netherlands that it turns out will from now on share a very similar itinerary to us, getting in the way or forcing us to change our plans (for this reason we christen them the Ducking Futch) and – much

to their irritation – go straight up the tower. It's not our fault or our problem that their leader and ground agent have mis-communicated with Alex, so we ignore their heated whispers and ascend to the top level. In the pre-dawn gloom we can make out an obvious straight, dead tree that must be the display post. A few moments later, Alex, trying to keep everyone happy, appears and asks if we mind a couple of them joining us, because there is not room for their unfeasibly large group on the lower deck. We reluctantly agree. But we didn't arrange a trip with just 3 of us only to end up birding in a group of 13, so we make sure we have the best viewing spots covered and yield only once we are sated with views and images. Fortunately, this pisses them off royally. ;-)

As the first rays of light appear, a bird flies in and lands on the top of the post. I whisper excitedly: "It's there"! But it's just a **Dollarbird**. In fact we have to wait for another 30 minutes, tensions rising, Dutch birders trying peer over our shoulders and encroaching on our personal space that we try jealously to protect! Then the moment we have waited for: a **Twelve-wired Bird of Paradise** — the pole dancer himself — lands on top of the post. The light is still not brilliant but we fill our SD cards as it preens, then does a few moves on the post. Sadly, this bird is partial-moult so lacks the full complement of massive bright yellow breast/belly feathers. He stays for about 20mins, then, with apparently no female appearing, flies off into the forest. We too depart, walking off with our guides deeper into the forest, leaving the Dutch to admire the empty post from their now unobstructed viewpoint.





We have another top target for the morning and our guides take us to a platform that looks up to a tree where, allegedly, **King Bird of Paradise** displays. There are none here and we walk further into the forest where the locals know of another display tree. We arrive and crane our necks unoptimistically to branches almost directly above us. Benny plays the call and amazingly, almost immediately it is answered – there is a bird here. And then, far above us, there he is, a small jewel of crimson and white. The funny green coins on the end of his two thin tail spines are invisible, hidden behind leaves, but he shimmies up and down his branch and we see them bobble out behind him. He flits away, but is soon back, then is joined by a female, ratcheting up his excitement level noticeably as he repeatedly comes back to the same vertical branch and works his way up it. Then another couple of males arrive and more female and we have a full-on-lek, with birds flying left and right, jostling for position on the prime perch. Though our viewing angle is abominable we lock our necks at 90 deg for the duration and have perhaps our most memorable experience of the trip so far, poor images and even poorer video unable to capture the true feel of the moment. After 30-40 minutes we drag ourselves away, privileged to have spent some time in “the court of the Crimson King” (coined by Steve who makes a smug note of the phrase – and hopefully won’t be too pissed off at my breach of copyright).



As we walk back along the trail we find another goody, **Papuan Babbler**. A group of 2-3 birds plays hard to get but eventually we all get decent views of at least one of them as they busily move about low down and in the mid-storey of the forest. These “babblers” are from the Australian, not the South-east Asian family of the same name, so they are structurally similar to familiar mallee birds like White-browed and Chestnut-crowned with long tails and long down-curved beaks. I quite like adding these Papuan additions to Australian families. Papuan Treecreeper was another, likewise

Australasian and not related to the old world treecreepers, though filling a similar ecological niche. I am also reminded of a glaring miss in '08 when we came “this close” (imagine my finger and thumb are just a cm apart) to seeing Painted Quail-thrush, the only New Guinean member of this fabulous, desirable family of which I have seen 3 of the available 7 Australian species

When we woke before 4am it was still 30deg plus and near 80% humidity. It's now 9am and oppressive. We rest at a viewpoint, downing copious amounts of water, but avian activity is minimal. Jon creates a torrential waterfall just by wringing out his shirt...



Once we are somewhat recovered we decide to walk back to the lodge. En route we spend some time with a **Black-sided Robin**, and then as we approach the lodge a **Papuan Dwarf Kingfisher** zooms across in a tiny blur of blue and gold.

Back in the open-air dining room Shita is waiting with a superbly refreshing home-made iced drink of cucumber and juice. We have an early lunch (**Black Sunbird** and **Red-capped Flower-pecker** pose

nicely in the trees next to our table), then rest. Bird activity is minimal at this time of day so there is little point in flogging ourselves around the jungle again.



At 3pm we are back on the road, this time heading to an area of gardens looking for birds of the open grasslands. The area has a distinctly Australian feel to the avifauna with **Willie Wagtails**, **Rainbow Bee-eaters** and **Sacred Kingfishers** all prominent. We find a good sized flock of **Grand Mannikin** here, and add a few **Crimson Finch** (though also found in Australia, this is a lifer for me). We are hoping for Hooded Mannikin but despite

searching through all the Grands we find none.



Our plan is to spend the last 2 hours of daylight at km9 on the road beyond our village where we are told there is a nice lookout with a few species we've not yet found. It takes 20min to get here and we are dismayed to see the Dutch minibus parked up on the roadside. We are pissed off, but unlike this morning we can claim no priority. Benny is especially put out – he chatted with their ground agent over lunch and told them this is where we planned to come. Their guy said nothing. The least he could have done is tell us their plan so we could have chosen to do something different – we have a gnawing suspicion it's deliberate. But deliberate or not, we have no desire to bird in a big group. Instead we turn around, wasting good birding time to drive back to Alex's and bird once again from the tower. We observe similar species to yesterday, finding nothing new.

Once it's dark we head to a new location, led by local land-owner Danche, who says he has a good spot for Papuan Hawk-Owl. We pull up in the vehicles and he indicates a set of trees across a small bridge. There is nothing here but we follow on foot along a trail through fields and gardens en route to another spot he knows. "Not far", he says. Yeah right — We have heard that before in New Guinea! Having walked nearly 2 km through these fields and still with little sign of the woodland we imagine is needed by the Hawk Owl, we come to a stream. Inspection in our torchlight reveals near-vertical muddy banks and a thin, precarious log acting as a bridge. Danche crosses, but Benny gets half-way down the bank and his wellies sink a foot into the soft mud and stick fast. Personally my confidence that Danche will actually deliver is pretty low, and I really don't fancy risking falling and getting hurt (an injury could jeopardise the next two weeks birding) or damaging expensive optics trying to cross by torchlight for the small chance of Hawk Owl. Jon and Steve clearly feel the same way so we indicate to our team that we are going to turn back. The trip is not a total waste, though, because as we retrace our steps we get awesome views of a **Papuan Nightjar** that poses wonderfully ("if I keep completely still you can't see me") on a fence-post.





Day 8, 19/8/17, “In which we spend hours thrashing through dense jungle and see almost nothing.”

Over dinner last night we have discussed our options. We have one more full day in Nimbokrang followed by a final morning. A place called Jalan Korea, about 30min drive away, seems to hold a few species we still need, including two megas: Victoria’s Crowned Pigeon and Shovel-billed Kingfisher (Kookaburra).

We decide that our remaining priority is to find Victoria Crowned Pigeon. This is one of two possible Crowned Pigeons on our trip, the other being Western, which we hope for at the end of the trip on Waigeo. The Crowned Pigeons are huge, chicken-sized pigeons with an elaborate fan of feathers on their crowns, and a massively desirable family because of their amazing looks and rarity. They are also, according to Benny, the converted hunter, delicious (which perhaps explains why they are rare). We also know now that the BTA crew missed it, and in a childish competitive sort-of way, it has consequently become even more important. Our other topic of conversation over dinner is Benny’s hunting past, and his very poor upbringing. Mambruk (as the Crowned Pigeons are known) for dinner would have been a real treat. This line of conversation coalesces into a plan: we will starve Benny, and then when he is **really** hungry, head out to VCP territory. He will be sure to track one down for us :-).

Jalan Korea is owned by Danche, so, like last night, he will be leading. Hmmm. A 3.30am rise is required to get there in time to do some owling and look for Shovel-billed Kookaburra, though we know that most people miss this elusive crepuscular skulker. Ominously, even before we have arrived we stop to see a car ahead of us bogged. Oh no, it’s the Ducking Futch! Fortunately they are

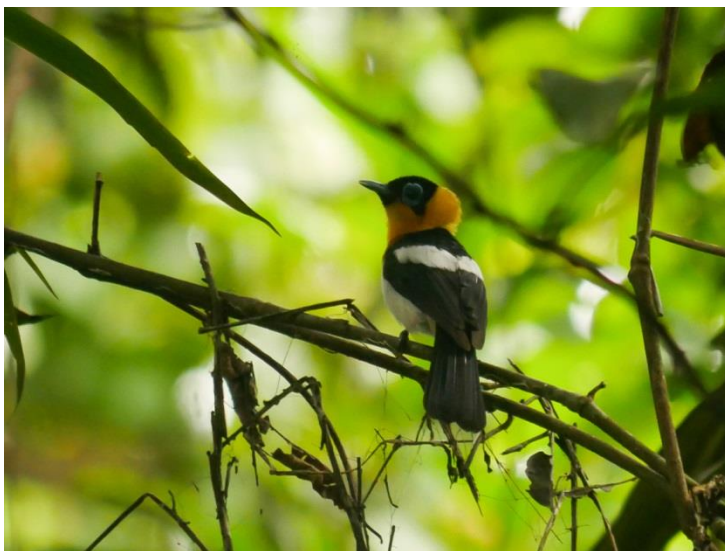
not too badly stuck and with a bit of help from our guys they are on their way again. We follow hoping they will not be in the same spot as us.

We arrive in the dark and from 5am-7am follow Danche down various trails trying for the owls and other crepuscular species. After a trudge for several hundred metres we barely wait for any kind of response before we retracing our steps back to the vehicle then trying a trail on the other side of the road that is apparently better. Why didn't we go there first? Why have we not tried much at the first spot? Danche, we are rapidly forming the view, is a textbook exhibition of Dunning-Kruger effect, totally misplaced confidence in his own abilities.

In the darkness we hear **Hook-billed Kingfisher** but fail to see one. I hear a **Papuan Frogmouth**, and **Greater Black Coucal** (now Ivory-billed Coucal) are singing all around but we dip again on Papuan Hawk Owl. We do have a **Shovel-billed Kookaburra** respond to our playback but it is not interested in coming closer and showing itself. By 6.30 it's getting light and we leave the trail to go back the car for breakfast. The Dutch are doing the same and perhaps they are just as pissed off to see us as we are them. Fortunately we will be heading off into the forest again while they bird the road.

We may not agree with Danche's strategy, but we have no other plan and have to trust him and our guides. He certainly knows his way around the jungle, which is just as well because within minutes I realise I have no idea where we are or what I would do if I lost the group. We all fall into line again to follow Danche, and walk on hopeful that we will see movement on the forest floor or on the trail ahead. **White-eared Catbird** calls and is very responsive to our playback but all we see is a dark streak bombing across the trail a couple of times and cannot pin it down for decent views. Later we pause at a clearing where Benny indicates that a chattering call we can hear is **Common Paradise Kingfisher**. He plays the call and immediately at least 3 birds are interested and we can hear them calling around us. We are aware they are moving about but they are very tough to get onto. Eventually I get views I am happy with, though there is no chance of a photo, which is a shame for such as cracking bird.

We carry on deeper into the jungle, though worryingly the trail becomes less and less obvious, heavily overgrown and we stomp our way through dense palms and vines and other undergrowth



affording no visibility. Even if Danche comes across a Mambruk, surely it will flush before anyone can get on it, and the forest is so dense we'd have no chance of relocating it. Indeed this is exactly what happens when he comes across a White-bibbed Ground-dove. For five hours we traipse around the jungle, seeing almost nothing (though we do find some Cassowary footprints, which is exciting). We add only two new birds: **Ochre-collared Monarch**(a cracking looking split from Frilled

Monarch) and **Emperor Fairywren**. Steve manages some decent photos of the former.

We are about to emerge to the vehicles when one of the locals excitedly comes to get us. While we have been bombing about apparently aimlessly following Danche, another of the guides, Martin, has been pursuing a different strategy. Moving quietly and alone in a different area he has been looking for fruiting trees — he has hit the jackpot with a Crowned Pigeon feeding quietly on fallen fruits on the ground. It has flushed up to a branch in the tree and he is confident it will still be there. We hurry after him to the spot, a few hundred metres along the road then down a short trail into the forest, barely able to believe our luck. Martin moves cautiously and peers up into the tree, moving his head back and forth to change the angle. Arrgghhh! It's gone!

We spend the next hour searching the vicinity, hoping it will not have gone far, but we draw a blank. So close, yet so far. Eventually heat, hunger and a significant drop in the enthusiasm levels mean we knock it on the head and travel back to Alex's. Once again Shita has prepared a superbly refreshing iced drink that helps us recover and regroup. We reflect that it was always a long shot, though in all honesty we had not expected it to be quite so birdless, and the tactics to find the pigeon so blunt!

After lunch we spend an hour back at the Mannikin site, but we are too early and find only a single **Grand Mannikin**. We do grab a lifer for all of us when Jon picks up a distant large bird which we identify as **Great-billed Heron** through the scopes. Then we drive back to km9 and spend 3.30 until sunset looking out from our elevated viewpoint. As from the tower over the previous couple of evenings, most of the birds we see are ones in flight, shuttling from fruiting or flowering trees to their roosts. We note **Western Black-capped Lory**, **Sulphur-crested Cockatoo**, **Coconut (Rainbow) Lorikeet**, **Brown Lory**, and **Blyth's Hornbill**. Jon finds a **Lowland Peltops**. I observe this casually, thinking it's a non-lifer but reference to my trip list later on reveals that it was one I needed. Indeed Steve was even more casual and failed to get on it. He does, however pick out some distant **Vulturine Parrots** in flight but neither Jon nor I can get on them before they disappear behind a distant ridge. No matter, I saw lots of them 10 years ago in PNG (though they were one of my birds of the trip back then). Best bird here is **Papuan Spinetail**, wheeling about with **Uniform Swiftlets** above our heads.

Back at Alex's we reflect on a dispiriting day. As we enjoy cold beers and another fantastic meal prepared by our hosts, we consider our options for tomorrow. We have another morning, and even all afternoon if needed, for our remaining targets. We devise a new, cunning plan and get our local guides to buy into it. They think it might just work!

20/7/18, Episode IX, "A new hope"

We have finished the previous day's slog by forming a new plan for today, our last day in the lowlands of Nimbokrang. Benny and the local guides believe we still have a chance of Victoria's Crowned Pigeon in a spot where they are not usually seen, but where Martin – yesterday's finder – thinks they might be. Our experience over the last two days has led us to realise that Martin is the key guy. Though Danche might bluster his over-confident way around, Martin is the real brains of the operation. His understated, quiet *modus operandi* disguises the fact that he is the one with the knowledge and genuine field-craft that has at least an outside chance of delivering for us.

VCP is low chance, so our new strategy, rather than putting all our eggs in that basket again, will be to bird as if it's not on our target list. But when we are close to where Martin's instincts tell him we could score, we will send the "Mambruk whisperer" off to try and locate one. His chances are greatly increased if he goes alone, and if he does find one, we will just have to cross all spare fingers and toes and hope it stays put long enough for us — unlike yesterday. In the meantime we will go to a different Twelve-wired stake-out, walk briskly through the forest to try and connect with a Lesser BoP lek, then bird Alex's forest while Martin tries to weave his magic.

Up at 4am (a veritable lie-in compared with the last two days) we drive a short distance beyond the village then walk for 20min in the dark along another dense forest trail. A **Papuan Frogmouth** hoots its repetitive call, and **Hook-billed Kingfishers** call all around us but we cannot stop because we need to be at the tower hide before first light. From 5.30 til 6am we are in a more private tower hide, no other birders pressuring us from behind and we have a much more relaxed, intimate and just better birding experience.



At 5.40, much earlier than Wednesday, a male Twelve-wired Bird of Paradise appears on the display post in front of the hide. This bird sports the full set of yellow breast/belly feathers that Wednesday's bird lacked, but curiously seem to be moulting its twelve wires — at least we cannot see the weird curly tentacles that give the bird its name. This does not, however, deter the females! Soon after he arrives, a female also stops in, and then another. The male is sent into his full display, shimmying up and down his pole. The chosen female joins him on the post and they go through a courtship ritual ending with mating! What a cracking start to the day (for us as well as them, though

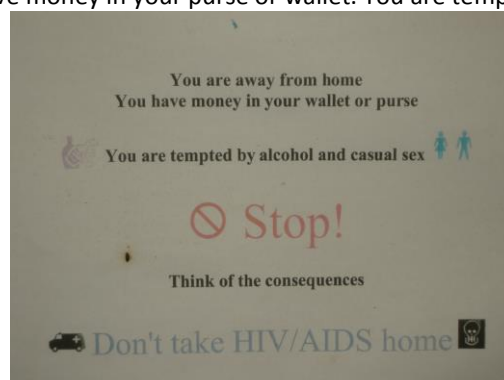
in the jungle a long way from loved-ones, we can only dream of morning sex ¹). We are glad we have made the decision to revisit a Twelve-wired display.

As soon as they have mated, they fly off into the forest for a post-coital cigarette, and we hasten down from the tower and follow Martin along a narrow, little-used trail as quickly as we dare, hoping to connect with a Lesser BoP lek.

We arrive at 6.20 and there are indeed still a couple of Lesser BoPs high up in their display tree. We are accustomed, from our experience in the Adelbert Mtns a decade ago, to witnessing display high up in the canopy, semi-obsured by various leaves and boughs – not for us the eye-level views that Sir David enjoys because the BBC team arrives replete with experts who can make rope and pulley systems and fashion a hide in the canopy. Never mind, we have some nice encounters with 2-3 male **Lesser Bird of Paradise** in their display tree and nearby.

We then find another BoP perched up on a tall palm behind the Lesser BoP tree – female **Twelve-wired**. Another bird joins it lower down: **Glossy-mantled Manucode**. Then the Manucode flies, only to be replaced by a male **Pale-billed Sicklebill**. Minutes later we find another (or the same bird) even closer and grab our first decent images of Pale-billed Sicklebill.

¹ I am reminded of a sign from a hotel room on Manus Island whose poetic motif is almost an order: “You are a long way from home. You have money in your purse or wallet. You are tempted by alcohol and casual sex”.





Benny then finds another elusive goody, Golden Myna. Then at 7.45 we descend into the forest again. Martin makes a short foray and returns to point us to a nesting pigeon. It is a **Beautiful Fruit-dove**, a lifer and our only one of the trip.

We enjoy lovely views of this female bird then wait around in a clearing while Martin wanders off to where he has a hunch there might be Mambruk. We are not hopeful, but it's worth a shot, surely? We hear **King Bird of Paradise**, then find a **Rufous-bellied Kookaburra**.

At 8.15, one of the local guides appears, somewhat out of breath but grinning from ear to ear. Surely not? But yes, the news is Martin has got one! The tension rises immediately and we brace for action. It's easy enough following the guide at some pace along the narrow jungle trail, but then we have to go off piste. Lithe Papuan bodies are designed for and accustomed to slipping through the dense vegetation, but these lumbering westerners catch feet on vines, tangle clothes in wait-a-while vines and finding the right balance between haste and stealth is impossible to judge. I am hot on Jon's heels, Steve just behind me I hear Steve muttering under his breath behind me: "Come on, come on!!!" . Or maybe that's the clean version. I can't recall.

We see Martin crouched about 1m below us and Jon scrambles down. I have realised over the last week that Jon is not only quick on the draw and very sharp in his skills, but he also has a knack of

being right place right time, whether that's first on the trail, last in line, or even peering at a different bit of forest. He crouches, lifts his binoculars and exclaims quietly, "Oh yes, I've got it". I take the three more steps forward, plant my feet behind Jon and start to crouch to get a view when suddenly he announces, "Flying!". I lift my gaze and see a vague shape zoom off to the right. Steve, a metre behind me has seen nothing, and in an instant we have gone from the tensest, joyful anticipation to the deepest misery. Steve, never one for hiding his emotions, and also the most creative swearer I have ever known, is off on an expletive laden outburst of despair and disappointment. With the bird gone, our chatter rises and Steve continues to curse. Suddenly the cry goes up – "There's another one". "And another". Two more VCP have just flown, following the first. Unbeknown to us there were in fact three Victoria's Crowned Pigeons in the same tree and we have just missed all of them.

As Steve continues to f and blind, I am quiet, but I am feeling exactly the same. After a minute or two's wondering WTF we are going to do, Steve follows one of the guides in the general direction the birds have flown. I hang about waiting to see what Martin's move will be, and fearful that bombing through the jungle will have virtually zero chance of relocating these shy birds.

Five minutes later, Julius appears and beckons me. Again? Surely not? Can I bear to have my hopes raised one more time only to be dashed even harder? I follow him in the direction Steve took, Martin and Jon hot on my heels. Two minutes later I see Steve crouching and grilling something much higher up. "Get in here Ian!" he hisses urgently. I slide down, still worried about that delicate compromise between speed and stealth. I peer through the low vegetation, where, partially obscured I can make out *two* **Victoria's Crowned Pigeons**. The view initially is shite, but in the knowledge that we are somewhat hidden by the lower vegetation I am able to adjust my position gradually to get a full on view of one of them. To my left, Steve's view affords both birds next to each other and he bags some amazing pics before one of the birds moves slowly up the branch, pumping its tail as it does so. Is this a sign it's about to fly again? No; they both stay.





Jon slides in behind and now we all enjoy moments of pure joy. For best viewing and photos I end up lying on my back in the mud, but I don't care. This is one of my favourite ever birding moments. When we eventually walk back to the clearing where we'd started this episode I rummage deep in my rucksack and pull out my hip flask of single-malt whisky, carried around for just such an occasion. Shots all round!



Three blokes who have just seen Victoria's Crowned Pigeon (the best looking of this stunning family) and who are suitably celebrating by swigging Jura single malt.

It is only 9am, but, we head back gradually towards the lodge. **Grey Crows** fly over a clearing and we hear the Black-sided Robin again, but it's hot and avian activity minimal. We've seen enough megas

to be ready for an early lunch. We wash in our basic trough-and-bucket bathroom, pack our bags and rest for a bit before one last bit of birding.

Mid-afternoon we head one final time to the gardens and grassland area but once again can't find Hooded Mannikin. We add **Chestnut-breasted Mannikin** to the trip list and find White-winged and **Emperor Fairywren**, as well as a stunning white-morph **Variable Goshawk**.



We leave Nimobkrang with a backdrop of yet another stunning Papuan sunset and settle in to the humorously named Hor-Ex hotel. Tomorrow we will fly early to Manokwari, Shita's home town.



Day 10, 21/7/18, “Arfak Mountains, here we come!”

Another day that is primarily travel. We are booked on the first flight from Sentani to Manokwari, though this doesn't get us to Manokwari until late morning, at which point we will have a 3 hour drive up into the Arfaks. At least we have a lie in in the comfortable HorEx beds. But guess who is on the same flight: our hearts collectively sink when we see the Ducking Futch at the airport.

On arrival in Manokwari, Shita is greeted by all and sundry – this is her home and it seems she knows almost everyone! The Arfaks are famously wet, and with clouds hanging over the mountains today, we load up the Hiluxes then our drivers and guides strap everything down tight under tarpaulins for the slow journey up the village of Mingre. Along the way we stop and Shita (from the other vehicle) produces our picnic lunch – she has thought of everything. We follow the coast initially before turning inland and soon afterwards we start a steep ascent. The road degrades abruptly into a 1-in-5 and even 1-in-4, deep-holed and rutted track, meaning 20km/h is pretty-much top pace.

The good news as we ascend, ultimately to 1500m a.s.l., is that the forest looks excellent, with wonderful big emergent trees, and much less sign of extensive logging than in either of the other places we've been.



Local map. Eco-tourism is a major factor in explaining why there is decent forest here.

We arrive in the lovely village of Mingre where Shita has been coming with tour groups for the last few years (though not marked on the map above, it is basically where the “you are here” green man is). We will spend 3 or 4 days here, and 1 or 2 days up at a remote camp owned by Zeth Wonggor from Syoubri, the next village along the road. It is raining as we arrive, so after we have settled in we reconsider our plan to go to a local Magnificent Bird of Paradise hide, because the weather means this is probably a waste of time. A better plan, Benny and Shita suggest, might be to wait for the rain to stop, then drive the road looking for Masked Bowerbirds. These stunning birds like to sun themselves straight after rain. Well, it sounds like a plan!

While we wait, I sit on the verandah of the hut that will be Steve's and my home for the next few days (Jon has his own hut 50m up the track) and scan the tree-tops opposite. We find an **Island Leaf Warbler**, then see another small bird. It takes a bit of detective work to make out what it is as it moves mostly obscured in dense foliage, but I gradually piece together that this a female **Red-chested Pygmy Parrot**.



The rain stops at about 3.30 and we load into the car and drive about 15mins down the road. Three Hiluxes (80% of the vehicles here are Toyota Hilux, 15% motorbikes and 5% Mitsubishi Triton) are parked up just below the next village and we realise the Ducking Futch are at the Mag BoP hide. Just as well we changed our plans because otherwise we'd have been in conflict with them again! We carry on another 500m then stop to scan.

Within seconds Jon announces he has the bird: some distance away, but shining like an orange beacon on a dead treetop, is a **Masked Bowerbird**. Our digi-scoped photos do not do justice to stonker which sits out proud sunning itself, pretty-much as predicted by the guides. Nearby a small flock of **Papuan Mountain Pigeon** are likewise sunning themselves to dry off. We spend quite a bit of time trying to get a Goldenface (old name, Dwarf Whistler) to cooperate. Steve and I had this in PNG in '08 but it was a dip on Jon's trip in '03 so he is especially keen to see this cute new-world-warbler-like bird. Once again Jon sees various bits of bird while I don't even see any movement in the canopy. I'm relieved I don't need it! **Fantailed Monarch** is also new. It is also nice to see several **Blyth's Hornbills**, a big and obvious indicator of forest health!





The villagers have once again prepared a marvellous meal for us using their basic equipment, but we are again plunged into temperance because Manokwari, like Wamena is dry. Apparently the only place you can buy booze is the police station! A degree of Shadenfreude accompanies the news that the Dutch have dipped on the Mag BoP ;-).

When designing the trip, three birds stood out right from the very start as *must see*, and also *must see well*, displaying if possible: Western Parotia, Black Sicklebill and Wilson's Bird of Paradise. See these well and the trip is more-or-less a success. Fail on any one and the trip is verging on disaster. Tomorrow will be our first crack at one of them, the Parotia, so we head to bed with great anticipation – and even some nervousness – of the following morning's itinerary.

Day 11, 22/8/18, "The quest for the Big 3 begins."

We drive down to a site not far below Mingre and then walk in the dark about 15mins down a steep slope, though we are now accustomed and this is nothing compared with the Ibele trail. What appears to be a dump of rubbish at first sight causes us to pause in our descent. Closer inspection reveals this is the bower of one of the Bird's Head's most famous resident species, Vogelkop Bowerbird. The maker of the bower is not yet in residence, but we see that this particular individual is fond of crisp packet wrappers, black fungus and black plastic, greeny-brown fruits and various other decorations.

We need to be in the Parotia hide before dawn so we do not stay long, and it turns out the hide we need is only another couple of minutes along the trail. Benny leaves the three of us to settle in to our "accommodation" at 5.50.



Western Parotia display court

We wait for 15-20 minutes, during which time I can hear Black-billed Sicklebill's beating whistle, so unlike most other BoP raucous cries and rasps. Fifteen to twenty minutes later, a large black bird lands on the cleared ground about 5m away: **Western Parotia**. We are too nervous to start taking pictures, and then it comes even closer, landing on branch a mere 2m away and staring straight at us. I am sure it knows we are here, and when cautiously I shift my position marginally – I swear noiselessly – seconds later it flies up and out of sight. Shit – have I just blown it? We sweat on its return and it keeps us in suspense. I have flashbacks to Mag BoP in the Huon when we had 5 seconds viewing of a bird that then disappeared never to be seen again. As we wait Steve indicates that the **Black-billed Sicklebill** we've been hearing is visible to our left. I crane my neck to see but can't see anything at the spot he seems to be describing. After what feels like an age, but is probably only a few seconds, I realise that the spot is about 2 feet to the left, and by twisting my body even further I can see a B-B Sicklebill is at the base of the tree, looking up the trunk and calling.

The Parotia returns and once again inspects his display court, clearing a few leaves out of the way. Again we hope this is the prelude the full action. He seems set to go into a dance, but then again flicks up to the perch in front us. We collectively hold our breath and he goes back to the court. Now he sets his stance, legs astride, holds for a few seconds, gradually lifts his "skirt", then like a ballerina tiptoes in a circle in front of the large trunk. He starts with his back to us but as he turns around the half circle he stops, flicks his shimmering gold necklace and dodges his neck back and forth like an Indian dancer, weird head plumes bouncing about as he agitates his head. Magic!



Over the next 2 hours a few females visit and he is periodically in attendance to repeat the performance as many as 9-10 times. We come to recognise the pattern of the performance, which is repeated each time. Eventually at 8.45 Benny comes back to get us and we leave the hide on a massive high. The first of the “Big 3” has performed brilliantly. My only regret afterwards is how dark the forest floor remained for the entire time, and the fact that I have failed to bring my tripod, so all my pictures are hand-held at fairly low shutter speeds.

We spend the rest of the morning birding the trails below Mingre, eventually returning to the village on foot. From 8.50 we observe various new birds including **Black Fantail**, **Vogelkop Scrubwren**, **Black Pitohui**, **Pygmy Drongo** and **Sclater’s Whistler**. We see a several female Parotias in the forest, but then observe another largish, dull, brown bird in a fruiting tree. This is neither a female Parotia nor female Black Pitohui – in fact this is our first of the non-descript but very special **Vogelkop Bowerbird**.

At 9.30 a high-pitched, thin call alerts us to the fact that there is **Spotted Jewel-babbler** nearby. We spend maybe the next 30mins with this notorious skulker for pretty ordinary views. I see one briefly

picking its way along the first floor but too obscured even to see wing spots that give it its name. Steve and Jon get better views, especially when at one point two birds, excited by our playback and each others' presence, chase each other around, briefly blowing their cover. I see the speedy movement but cannot land bins on either before they have taken off again. I tick it off mentally, but hope for better views over the next few days.

New birds continue as the morning draw on, with Mountain Fruit-dove fairly common, sweet **Blue-grey Robin** putting in an appearance and our first **Arfak Honeyeaters** (the Arfak version of Common Smoky from the Snow Mountains) which play hard-to-get but eventually give decent views. Another desirable species here is White-striped Forest Rail. Our experience with Chestnut F-R on the Ibele Trail has made me nervous of this species and this morning we have no luck. The first site we try immediately elicits a response. I raise my bins to my eyes to grill a small dark body rushing directly towards our speaker, only to see a small rat-like creature running over, presumably in the expectation of an easy meal. Wisely, no real Forest Rails are in attendance. At another site we have a half-hearted response but completely contrary to the guides' expectation, no bird appears and it goes completely silent.

As we walk back the village for lunch we add **Friendly Fantail**, a cute **Papuan Flycatcher (Flyrobin)**, and **Papuan Treecreeper** to the morning's list. We miss a few birds that go down as heard only – some because they are unresponsive, some because they are tricky – Vogelkop Melidectes (much less conspicuous than its counterpart in the Snow Mountains, Belford's), Vogelkop Whistler, and Ashy Robin. But at this stage, on our first morning, we are pretty relaxed.

After lunch the locals take us down to one of the unoccupied huts at the bottom of the village. We enter cautiously and peer up into the rafters following our guide's gaze. There staring wide-eyed down at us is a stunningly gorgeous **Mountain Owlet-Nightjar**.



Mountain Owlet-nightjar

At 3.30 we head down the road in the car again, hoping for closer views of Masked Bowerbird and maybe some other, slightly lower species. We see nothing new, missing a close Bowerbird found by one of the locals, but which flies before we can join him. We add **Little Shrikethrush**, and see a couple of **Lesser Bird of Paradise** including a fabulous male.

After dinner, Jon heads off to bed, too tired (or perhaps lacking the confidence in our ability) to come owling. I gather speaker, flash and new wolf-eyes torch and we walk down the the bottom of the village. Standing next to the ONJ hut I play Greater Sooty Owl's falling bomb whistle. I am not hugely expectant so I am amazed when a big shape drifts over the large tree in front of us. Steve, perhaps trying to convince himself not to get excited, says he thinks it is a fruit bat. I am not so sure and scan the branches of the tree in the torchlight – I see eyeshine. I keep the torch steady and Steve is able to confirm that high above us, a superb **Sooty Owl** has landed and is checking us out. I struggle with torch and bins, unable to get both pointing at the same location until Steve takes the torch so I can get a better view. The owl, probably unhappy about the waving torch, takes off and lands in denser stuff at the back of the tree, though now agitated and uttering the insect-like territorial call. We try to coax it out with some more playback but it stays put. I realise I have a third call on my Australian Birds app, and play the threat screech. Instantly it is back on the wing gliding over our heads. We watch it fly in the torchlight until our view is washed out by the torch reflecting a dense spider-web just behind us. It continues to call for some time, but we leave it in peace, well satisfied with our night-bird haul for the day.

Day 12, 23/7/18, "Stairway to heaven"

At 6am we load ourselves and our kit for an overnight stay (or two) and drive a short way to the village of Syoubri. There Benny and Shita leave us with Zeth Wonggor, well known as one of the first to realise the opportunities for eco-tourism in the Arfaks. He has been guiding and hosting birders here for 24 years.

In beautiful sunshine (for once!) we bird along a trail the leads up a steep valley away from Syoubri. We spend the next 2 hours walking and birding slowly, picking up some nice new targets along the way. After giving us the run-around yesterday and earlier today we finally get decent views of **Vogelkop Melidectes**, and another morning highlight is the sweet Garnet Robin. In addition we've added **Grey-green** and **Perplexing Scrubwrens**, and **Spotted** and **Mid-Mountain Berrypeckers** and **Papuan Sittella**. As we get higher we also have our first (brief) views of **Mountain Mouse-warbler** and **Papuan Sittella**. **Mottled Berryhunter** calls but is heard-only (I will regret this when I return home and realise Rhagologus is a monotypic family. A much desired bird here is **Vogelkop Superb Bird of Paradise**. We find a male in fruiting trees that shows briefly, but a female shows much better. Zeth tells us not far away there is a Superb BoP display court, and if we hear the excited calls, this could be a sign to head to the hide he has constructed overlooking the male's favourite moss-covered log. Indeed for an hour between 9.30 and 10.30 we sit in the hide hoping, but we are out of luck, though a **Mountain Mouse-warbler** hops onto the log at one point.



When not in the hide, we hang around a clearing not far away. A non-birding highlight of the morning comes when one of the porters disappears momentarily, returning with several wild passionfruit which are delicious! But the reason we are loitering here is that we hope for one of the rarest and most elusive – if also least interestingly plumaged – birds of paradise, **Long-tailed Paradigala**. A nest near here is sadly not occupied otherwise we might have had an easy tick. Instead we spend a very frustrating 4 hours here hoping one will come to the fruiting trees. There is a surprising amount of bird activity, but it is almost all from a very active flock of **Red-collared Myzomela** that are feeding and chasing one another incessantly. We see a few bigger birds in the fruiting trees, but each time it turns out to be a female **Western Parotia** – we see five by the time we move on. At around midday as we have a picnic lunch one of the porters excitedly announces Paradigala and we all strain to get on it high in the canopy. Jon and Steve see a tickable but underwhelming silhouette, but I see nothing satisfactory, and all too soon it slips out of sight and we can't relocate it.

We find a few more nice birds before we move on including **Orange-crowned Fairywren** and a lovely roosting **Mountain Owlet-nightjar**. Apparently there was a Feline regularly roosting nearby also until it was flushed by a previous tour group. Grrr!

The next 1.5 hours are spent on a strenuous climb up to the campsite. It is not very muddy, but the trail is the steepest we have been on, at times feeling like it is almost vertical. I am grateful for all the cycling up Mt Lofty I did before the trip that have put some strength and endurance into my legs.

We arrive at a pretty basic camp where porters have already delivered food and our bagged-up clothes, sleeping bag and other miscellaneous gear. With “beds” set up, we grab a cup of tea then from 3.45 we go out with Zeth to explore. It is wonderful to be birding in high quality primary forest and we pause for selfies under some of the huge buttressed emergent trees. **Ashy Robin** and **Regent Whistler** are new additions and we have a very nice encounter with a **Lesser Ground Robin**.



German Camp

At one point Zeth points out an amazing bower of a **Vogelkop Bowerbird**. This one has a couple of hides set up opposite and we learn it is one a two that are being monitored and filmed by a Korean film crew making a documentary. Not far beyond the bower we hear an amazing call, like a storm-trooper laser gun, and we stop in our tracks – the second of the Big 3, **Black Sicklebill**. We are hoping to visit a display post tomorrow, but of course we follow the sound and track down an utterly superb male **Black Sicklebill**.



We carry on birding even as it is getting darker, continuing to find some goodies. We finally get tickable views of **Cinnamon-browed Melidectes**, find a **Dimorphic Fantail** and after longish chase get good looks at a couple of **Black-throated Robin** just before we lose most of the light.

After dinner, prepared over a campfire by our porters, I persuade Steve and Jon we should do some spotlighting. A **Papuan Boobook** calls from close to the camp and we work hard to get a look at this endemic Ninox. With that in the bag, as we walk back to the camp I play the call of **Feline Owlet-nightjar**. Staggeringly, it is answered immediately and it is very close to the camp. We try hard to find it but are struggling, even though it calls again once or twice. Zeth arrives and when it calls again he is immediately on the case – presumably more accustomed to its habits, he points the torch along a trail leading away for the camp and I hear Steve exclaim that he has the bird. I line up behind him

and look in the direction of the torch-beam but can't pick it up. "You're looking too far away — it's just there, right in front". I lower my gaze and wow! The bird is on a post barely 5m away, looking straight at us. It poses brilliantly and even the porters come out with mobile phones to get pictures. One of non-BoP highlights of the whole trip and all the sweeter for the team effort involved in finding it. We leave the ONJ in peace, but before we get to bed movement in the canopy attracts the attention of the locals. We point torches upwards and 15m above us a cuscus is wandering about looking for fruit.





Tonight will not go down as one of the more comfortable or restful sleeps in the trip. Our raised cane beds are hard and bumpy (even when supplemented with thin portable air-mattresses), they are not even horizontal so we slide down during the night, and it is very cold! At least we have had another cracking day birding.



Day 13, 24/7/17, "The highlights reel grows"

Today – or first thing in the morning at least – is all about one bird, Black Sicklebill. The second of the big three has loomed large in our thoughts since day one of planning. We saw it yesterday, and it's not even a lifer for Jon, but for we still want the intimacy of a dawn display experience. Inevitably then, we are up pre-dawn. It has rained pretty-much all night and is still drizzling as we rise, but mercifully as we set out at 5am for a 30min walk along the forest trails to the display post and Zeth's hides the rain eases, then stops.

We end up in 3 separate hides, one of us in each, though all with basically the same view. I ready my equipment, meter the light on the display post, and we wait.

Mindful of the difficulties of getting decent pictures while handholding a heavy camera and lens at low shutter-speed, high ISO, I have also brought my tripod. Indeed I might as well use the tripod for photography because one of the porters has been a bit too haphazard in his handling of my scope yesterday, and the thread on scope's tripod mount has been stripped out, rendering the scope itself virtually useless. First trial pictures just before 6am reveal just how dark it is: even at 6400ISO and maximum aperture, I can only get 0.6sec exposure!

It will gradually get lighter – though never much – but it is still very dark when, very soon afterwards we hear that amazing call, almost directly over our heads. It is so forceful, so loud, and so close, that I almost jump out of my skin. It calls again a few times, each time sending shivers of anticipation down the spine, and then finally at 6.15 a dark shape with an unfeasibly long tail bounds across the clearing and lands on the top of the post where our optics are trained. **Black Sicklebill**. I can barely fit the whole bird in my frame, so far down the post (about a metre) does the ridiculous tail dangle. Yesterday's views were either misty or silhouetted (or both), so only now for the first time do I see the satin sheen to its plumage, brilliant splodge of iridescent blue on its back, and small but bright blue spot behind its eye. As it sits, it preens and holds its epaulettes feathers that look a bit like stunted wings but whose only use is in display – away from its body like to resemble some dark, demonic, crucifix. Once or twice it lifts the epaulettes over its head, like a dark hood and transforms its shape into a weird, totally unbird-like spoon.





Sadly it is present only for 15 minutes, then flies off. A **Mountain Mouse-warbler** appears outside my hide providing a brief distraction but it is apparently that the Sickiebill is not coming back. Zeth appears at my hide and beckons, so I follow at pace. He has located it again, this time on an exposed branch. It is a bit further away and we must view through a narrow window in the vegetation. Zeth explains it often goes to this spot – it has probably decided that the forest was too dark this morning and will display out in the sun instead.

It flies again and we track for some minutes, including when it lands meters above our heads in a palm and clambers about looking for its favourite fruit. We celebrate, then carry on birding – what else would expect us to do? – we find a **Black Pitohui** and another **Cinnamon-browed Melidectes**.

We return to the camp then follow a trail in the opposite direction that takes us higher still up the mountain. Between 8 and 9 we see **Ashy Robin**, **Black Fantail**, **Papuan Flyrobin (Flycatcher)** and a couple of **Black-throated Robins**, including an immature bird that throws us for a bit – unlike the adults the imm has a rufous throat! Close 9am Zeth indicates we are reaching the lower altitude where Arfak Astrapia can be found. A few minutes later we stop close to a clearing but we are still somewhat strung out on the trail. Suddenly Augustus, one of our porters excitedly bursts out: **Harpy!** We all turn but he is at the back of the group, pointing behind. Jon (and maybe Steve),



right next to Augustus, turns just in time to see a huge-winged raptor fly away through the forest. I follow long enough to see the shape of a massive bird for a few seconds drift out beyond the trees to an open valley before losing it to view. Another one gets away.

Minutes later, same spot, more excitement! Has the Harpy come back? No, it's an **Arfak Astrapia**. This immature male behaves much better than the Eagle, giving us excellent views for a few minutes as it feeds on fruit and picks at moss covered branches. We will not encounter an adult, but then few birders do – they are gradually getting scarcer and scarcer, perhaps being outcompeted by Black Sickiebill which Zeth says are swelling their numbers in this area year by year. This bird is eminently missable and we know that other groups have struggled a lot to get it so we are relieved

to have it in the bag by mid-morning of our first day up here.

We also have a very brief encounter with **Spotted Jewel Babbler** here, but about 40mins later we find some more and I finally get the kind of views I have wanted. I have realised that playing the high-pitched alarm call gets the birds excited, and they fly rapidly around making them exceedingly hard to get onto. However I discover that I have also downloaded a softer contact call; playing this keeps the birds interested and they approach much closer, picking at the ground feeding as they sidle their way through the undergrowth. I wish I had worked this out earlier.

At the highest point we will reach we spend time at the bower of a **Vogelkop Bowerbird**. He has a lovely array of small blue berries topped by a plastic blue water bottle. Elsewhere he has collected some of the black fungus we've seen at other bowers, and unlike the others, he has also decorated a fallen moss-covered log with small piles of orange and red berries. We can hear he is close by so we retreat from the bower a few metres behind the log and try to make ourselves inconspicuous, though there is no hide here. He circles our group, and the way he is behaving he clearly knows we are here – but he never actually comes to the bower.

We retrace our path to the camp, about 40 mins away. We hear a few groups of parrots along the way, though getting onto these proves difficult as they feed in tree tops calling to one another to stay in contact. We have a nice encounter with some **Plum-face Lorikeets**, and get decent views of our first **Papuan Lorikeets** and find a few **Tit Berrypeckers**, both male and female which look quite different and a **Fan-tailed Berrypecker**. Back at the eagle clearing, suddenly the dry goes up “Harpy” again. Adrenaline surges and we look up — soaring above us is a huge eagle. Sadly the jizz is all wrong, and the bird is soaring, which NG Harpy rarely do. It's an Aquila – **Gurney's Eagle**. Immediately those of us who didn't see the earlier bird wonder if the first bird was also Gurney's, but we are assured by Jon that this is a different beast.

We arrive back at camp having pretty-much cleaned up our targets up here, so we are faced with a choice – break camp and hussle down the mountain during the least birdy hours of the day, and spend the night in relative comfort down in our Mingre huts, or stay here one more night, revisit the Black Sicklebill hides first thing, then have a more “leisurely” walk down to Syoubri at a better time for birds. We settle for the latter and let Shita now that we'll stay up here one more night (even up here, there is some limited mobile signal).



So now we need to decide on the afternoon's activity. I am keen to get better views of, and possibly observe a bowerbird tending its bower. Zeth negotiates with the film crew and they tell us their second hide will be empty this afternoon and we are welcome to use it. Sorted!

At 14.30 we settle into a hide that overlooks yet another bower, the fourth we have seen as we walked trails over the last 3 days. This bird, perhaps because of its proximity to the camp, has a large collection of blue plastic bottle tops, and seems to have a predilection for colourful flat things that it

has meticulously spread out. It has also acquired huge stash of blue binding tape, again probably pilfered from the camp. Again we wait. And wait some more. It's dull, but then there's little FOMO – fear of missing out – because we've seen our targets already. 90 long minutes later it has started to rain gently, but a bird appears and we collectively hold our breath; we hope it will tend the decorations and remove some leaves we strategically scattered.

Instead we get more than we bargained for. The next 20mins are yet another amazing point in a long highlight reel from the trip. Initially the **Vogelkop Bowerbird** does not stay long and disappears into the forest. We brace for disappointment. But minutes later it reappears with a female in tow and begins a vocal performance to rival the visual displays we've seen from the BoPs. He flies into the bower and uses it as an echo chamber, initially at the back out of sight, but then he moves closer to the edge next to his prize "jewels" – we can just make him out under the canopy – then he peers out from under the lip. He starts with wheezing and grunting like a pig, then various mimicry of other birds – gentle contact calls, louder tweets, and some song – and then he transitions into a repeated series of weird, beating, electronic noises like a radio being tuned, or a hissing alien (whatever that sounds like!), punctuated occasionally by an amazing noise that we can't work out if it is rushing air on beating wings or his impression of the same. At times it sounds like he is making 3 or 4 different vocalisations at once. The frenzied female flies back and forth to the bower maybe trying to work out where he is while he plays hard to get deep inside the bower.

The forest is dark, so I decide just to enjoy the show rather than be distracted by photography, but Steve has grabbed some fabulous video, which even if the shot goes in and out of focus and the bird is pretty drab, is still spectacular.

Eventually they both fly off into the forest and we reflect on yet another diamond moment. It is now raining quite heavily so we decide we might as well wait here in the shelter of the hide. Zeth was going to come and get us, but has not, so we hope and expect he is thinking the same. After another hour, during which time we amuse ourselves with word games, the rain abates, Zeth arrives and we troop back to the camp. It is just as well he does come for us, because I have become disorientated and would no doubt have taken a wrong turn on the way back.

Once back at the camp we relate our experience and are shocked – and maybe even perversely amused – to discover that the film crew have been here for 10 days hoping for just such a performance and so far have not had a female visit a bower. Our luck was definitely in this afternoon.

After dinner we can hear **Papuan Boobook** from last night's spot and wander up hoping to get a better view. We fail, but hear **Feline Owlet-nightjar** again. Steve shines the torch down a gully but cannot see it. But the boot is on the other foot tonight and I think I might've seen the beam catch

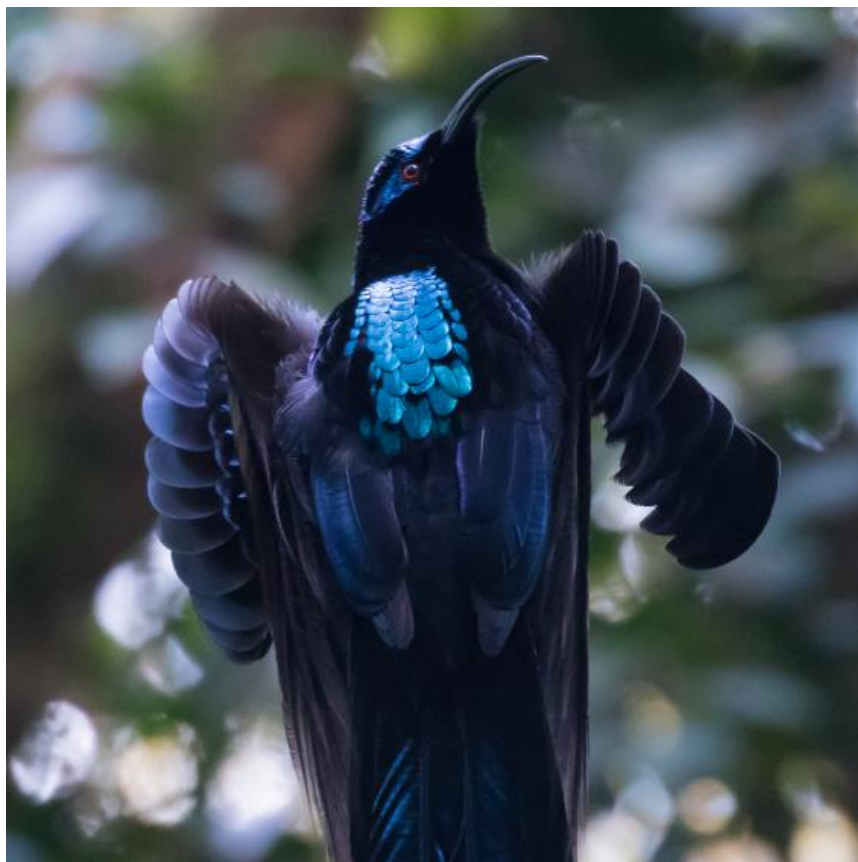


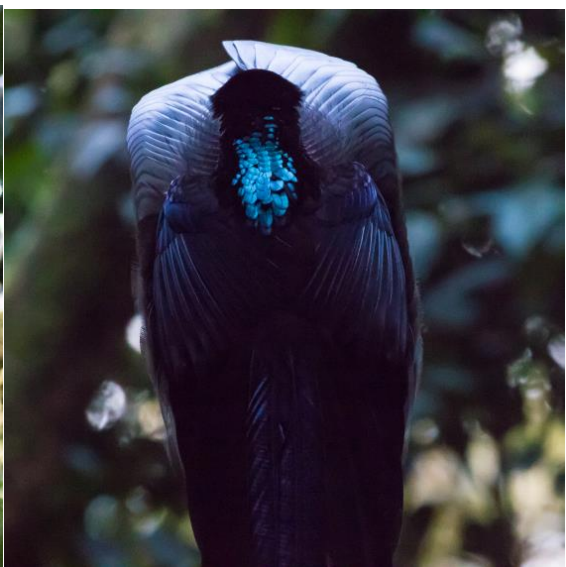
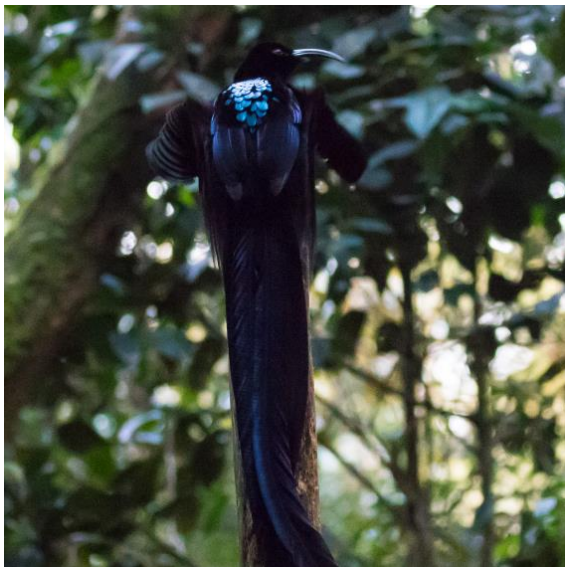
something very close. Sure enough when I suggest he shines it onto the closest bough, there he is, barely 3m away. We take a few pictures in the torchlight (he is too close for flash) but leave him in peace and retire for the night.

Day 14, 25/6/18, "Back in Black"

Our day begins identically to yesterday, with an early rise and walk down to the Sicklebill hides. Worryingly, although we can hear the Sicklebill calling once it gets to 6am, today the call is distant and doesn't seem to get closer. The clock ticks on and the later it gets the more I sure the bird is not coming today, for some reason. An Ashy Robin puts in a appearance right in front of my hide providing momentary distraction.

At 6.30 the Sicklebill has still not appeared – by this time yesterday it had come and gone – and I stand up in the hide to stretch my legs. I'm on the verge of calling out to the others who are nearby but in separate hides, to see if they want to knock it on the head, when I hear something. I imagine it's the **Ashy Robin** and initially look at the ground in front of the hide. When there is nothing there I raise my gaze up towards the display post. F**k me! The **Black Sicklebill** has silently floated in and is on the post in all his long-tailed glory – and in much better light than yesterday. He proceeds to treat us, and a female that joins, to a full-on display, including transforming himself into a metre-long spoon, and pumping his horizontal body up and down; truly weird, amazing to witness, and presumably irresistible to the female in attendance. Bizarrely, today he is silent for the whole performance — maybe with a female present he doesn't need to advertise audibly.





Once he and the female have flown off we pile out of the hides giddy with excitement of the show we have just witnessed. Back at the camp we pack our things and commence the walk down to Syoubri, taking a loop that we are told is slightly longer but less steep than the route we took up.

Modest Tiger Parrot is our first new bird of the morning, and then between the camp and our lunch-time Paradigala stakeout we find **Mountain Fruit-dove**, **Orange-crowned Fairywren**, **Garnet Robin**, **Friendly Fantail**, **Arfak Smoky Honeyeater**. We even hear Black Sicklebill calling as we descend.

I am hopeful of clawing back Long-tailed Paradigala and we pass through two known territories (including revisiting Monday's) spending a good amount of time in each. We find more **Vogelkop Superb BoPs**, with a male and two females in the fruiting trees, and a female **Western Parotia**, as well as **Vogelkop Whistler** and a **Black-breasted Boatbill**, but my luck is not in and we do not have a sniff of the Paradigala. A few hours later at 11am we carry on walking, arriving at Syoubri around midday as planned.

We meet up with Shita and Benny and they have a couple of bits of news for us: Our local guides have extended a hide for us where a young male Superb BoP has been very active, so we have a crack at that first thing tomorrow morning. They have also managed to locate a Feline Owlet-nightjar at a day roost. We will visit that straight after lunch. We are also relieved to discover that the Ducking Futch have moved on. Shita tells us she has been chatting with them and they asked after us: "Where are those big, rude, English men?". Jon and I are most upset that they should mistake us for rude Englishmen. After all, that is a good description of Steve, but it is deeply insulting that they might mistake the Welshman and Australian for English :-).

At 2pm we pull up at a spot just below Mingre and the locals take us up a steep bank to densely vegetated, narrow trail. On a small branch in the dense vines an **Owlet-nightjar** is roosting – how on earth they found this I have no idea. Our views are not, in fact, as good as we have had up at Zeth's because it is almost impossible to find an unobstructed viewing angle. Furthermore, we are in some doubt as to the identity of this bird. Though the locals have called this Feline, it looks like neither of the key suspects in our field guide: it has the striped breast of Feline, but its head pattern is much closer to Mountain, lacking the bold pale eyebrows and other facial markings. It also has a pale collar, missing in all the Feline illustrations and our photos from the previous two nights. Size-wise my impression is that it is intermediate between the two, though judging size in isolation is very difficult and error-prone. The closest illustrations we can find is of Archbold's which has the characters of both that we have observed. But that is out of range, apparently not found in the Arfaks (though Beehler and Pratt comment in the text that it is poorly known)! Subsequent comms with experts, including Phil Gregory and Thane Pratt, confirms this as an interestingly plumaged **Mountain Owlet-nightjar**, and Thane even questions the validity of *archboldi* as a species, given the considerable plumage variation in both *albertisi* and *archboldi* and minimal DNA differences.



After the ONJ visit we drive further down the mountain and from 15.00 we are stationed in the Mag BoP hide. We can hear lots of bird activity but I am not sure what species are about and one of the disadvantages of being in a hide is lack of all-round viewing. A **Rusty Mouse-warbler** puts in an appearance at the display court and we hear but do not see the Mag BoP. After an extended vigil Jon, once again sharp of wit and eyes – and also once again in the right place, next to the hide “door” – looks to the left of the hide out of the door and sees a male **Magnificent Bird of Paradise** about 10m away. Though I ticked Mag BoP 10 years ago following brief views both in the Huon and the Adelberts, this is the first time I have had a good clear view of an adult male including his amazing curled tail wires. I enjoy the view and resist reaching for the camera. Sadly he never actually comes down to the display court.

Later, after dinner, we try for a reprise of the Sooty Owl from night one in Mingre. Jon needs it, as, I suspect does Benny. We try a few places in the village but it seems we got lucky the first night and tonight we have no response.

Day 15, 26/6/18, “Almost stranded”

Back in Mingre we have one more day and a dawn, with a few key targets still to get.

Our day begins with yet another try for Sooty Owl; behind Jon’s hut one is excitedly calling at 5am. We try for a short while but again we are disappointed. Fifteen minutes later we are in the Hilux again for a short ride to a new part of the forest just below Mingre on the way to Syoubri. We walk in the dark about 20min to a Vogelkop Superb Bird of Paradise display site, where the locals worked yesterday to increase the size of a hide specially to accommodate the three “big, rude Englishmen”. We are nervous – has the locals’ presence working on the hide yesterday caused disturbance? Will the bird come back? As we arrive we realise the viewing slots are all wrong so we cut new ones, but will this cause disturbance? They have assured us all will be well, but we have heard such reassurances before, and sometimes it is impossible to explain the behaviour of wild birds.

Fortunately our fears are unfounded and we hear a **Superb Bird of Paradise** calling after just a short wait. Then at 6.15 he arrives and lands on the moss covered log that is his personal display area. As with many of our BoP experiences, the light is less than ideal for photography, especially of a very

dark bird, but we enjoy his “semi” performance. He jumps around on the log with epaulettes splayed, flicking them forward, and presumably practising for when a female comes. He spends an irritating amount of time facing away from us, but when he turns the extraordinary blue breast-band catches the light, and when he calls the bright yellow inside to his mouth shines in the gloom. Sadly for us, a female does not come to the log this morning, so he never goes into full “frowning mexican” display (as opposed to Greater Superb BoP which has a “smiley face” display). At the time I don’t mind too much, though in retrospect wonder if we should have returned to the hide or spent longer on our morning vigil – but in the whole scheme of things, a minor disappointment.



Benny comes for us after an hour or so and with the bird not present we decide to head off looking for other missing targets. **Black-eared Catbirds** are calling on the trail but remain stubbornly hidden, and we get no response to our attempts to find a White-striped Forest Rail.

Instead we head to a patch of forest not far from Mag BoP hide where we hope for Green-backed and White-faced Robin. We are eventually successful with former, but not before we unexpectedly hear a **White-striped Forest Rail**. After dipping earlier today and a few days ago, we decide amongst the three of us that we will “dictate the terms”. We direct the local posse of porters and



sundry hangers-on to retreat up the trail away from us until they are out of sight. We then get Benny to put the speaker some way off – about 15m away – and we keep a low profile. It may not be ideal for photography but in the first instance we are keen to get a decent view, and keeping our distance we are less likely to spook it. This works an absolute treat – within seconds of Benny running through the call on his speaker, a small dark body rushes across the trail past the speaker and into dense cover on the other side. OK, so the view is awful, but we know it is here. It rushes back and we can now see the orange body and dark, spotted wings. It continues to criss-cross the track, maybe 15-20 times in all and we get excellent views in bins, though it is never still and always dashing fast when it is even half-way exposed. The photos are pretty basic record shots, but are good enough to show the bird definitely has spots, not stripes, making it a female. It deserves to be left in peace, so reluctantly we depart without the frame-filling pictures we'd like but with yet another good bird and another wonderful experience for the trip.



On the way back to the car we try again for the Robins and get good views of **Green-backed Robin** for the first time, but at 11 we return to Mingre for an early lunch. The fact we have unexpectedly got the Forest Rail this morning has opened up the afternoon somewhat. I quite fancy the change of scene, and a bumpy drive to Angi Lake would be a nice change from slogging up and down a forest trail. This area, about 40km away (which on these terrible roads means 2 –

2.5 hours in the car) is rarely visited by birders but is the site of one of the most range restricted birds we can see on this trip, Grey-banded Mannikin. Although it's "just a manikin", I like the sound of the adventure and manage to persuade the others that the change of scene would do us good.

The trip to the lake turns out to be attractive to some of the locals as well, including a couple of kids for whom 5 hours in the back of the ute is a major treat! So we pile into the Hilux yet again with the 3 big rude dudes and driver Alvin inside, while Benny, two other locals and a couple of kids squeeze in the ute tray.



We've been told the road is even worse higher up but we are unprepared for just how bad it is. At one point we stop with a bunch of other cars and have to wait as successive trucks try to get up a steep, muddy, deeply rutted section and get bogged one after another. Each time there are locals on hand to help push, dig and otherwise cajole the trucks up the track – indeed I form the impression that these people are permanently employed at this section especially for this task! Beyond Mingre we notice that the forest is quite badly degraded by logging.

After just over 2 hours the road levels and we approach a village (Penibut). Alvin drives slowly along the road and we scan the grassy edges and gardens. Barely 100m into the village a flock of 6-7 birds flies up and we lock onto... a bunch of **House Sparrows**. Damn! But then almost immediately, from almost the same spot, a larger flock of around 20 birds lifts up and these have the obvious pale rump of our quarry. They fly 30-40m away and land in a dead tree for unequivocal (if slightly distant) views.



At this point it starts to rain, and though we will eventually get slightly better views of up to 30-40 **Grey-banded Mannikins**, we spend the next hour with umbrellas up and down, and getting into and out of the car. Our local posse, meantime, are hunkered down under a tarp in the back of the ute! I hope the kids are still enjoying themselves



At 15.50 we knock it on the head. The weather is not showing any signs of improving (if anything it's getting worse) so we doubt we'll get any better views of the Mannikins — in fact it looks like they have gone to early roost in a large, mostly hidden reed-bed. Meanwhile, we still have a 2 hour drive back to Mingre and it would be nice to complete the journey in the light.

We are about an hour into the return journey, heavy rain on the windscreen, when Alvin slows and stops. We peer through the windscreen wipers and see the reason: the road in front of us has gone, and is now just a torrent of water running down the slope and into a ditch. The surface has collapsed partway down the steep slope to our left, leaving a narrow section next to a steep slope up to the right, barely wide enough to walk along. Wisely, Alvin reverses and pulls up. We are soon joined by several other cars and various locals jump out of vehicles to inspect the damage. I grab my umbrella and likewise wander up to the edge. It does not look like we will be going anywhere fast, and first thoughts are, we will be here for the night.



As the rain eases slightly several of the locals get to work – we are not sure what they are trying to achieve, but they use machetes to cut at vegetation, lever rocks and dig the soil and mud. To my eye it doesn't seem to be doing much, but as events will show, what do I know? Meanwhile, Steve, Jon and I are wondering what we can do. We estimate we are about 15km still from Mingre, but maybe only 7-8 from the next village. We can't afford to be waiting here overnight so as soon as the rain stops we set out walking with Benny. Worst case, we reckon we can cover the 15km in 2-3 hours, but more likely we will try to find some locals with a car in the next village willing to give us a ride.



The sun sets after we have been walking for half an hour and in the torchlight I stumble into a deep puddle, water flooding over the tops of my mid-height walking boots which I am getting just about their first work out of the whole trip. My feet are soaked, but soon afterwards – an hour's walking time overall – we see that we have reached the first houses of a village. Some locals stare at these white dudes walking down the road with torches, but before Benny can ask them anything we hear an engine and see headlights from behind. Where has this car come from? It pulls up and we realise it's one of the cars that was stuck with us – somehow it has miraculously managed to negotiate the collapsed road. We hope we can get a lift with them and my heart sinks when they talk animatedly to Benny only to drive on without us. Fortunately, Benny explains, Alvin and the team are also through and will be the next car along.

As Alvin pulls up next to us we applaud. We, the rich, educated westerners, including an Oxford engineer and physicist have been put to shame by the resourcefulness and dogged determination of the locals in the face of adversity. I guess here, there is no other way – no road patrol or public works department or SES is going to bail you out of such a fix, so you just have to learn to do it yourself.

Alvin does not speak English, and Benny's English is not the best, so we have to piece the sequence together in broken English and through Shita's translations once we make it back to Mingre. It seems they have used their machetes, hands and other makeshift implements to dig away at the bank above the road to widen it. Only 3-4 cars only have made it across; Alvin is first and he floors the accelerator to make sure he gets to the other side quickly before it can collapse under him. It

doesn't and he is over! Two or three more cars follow before it has degraded again and everyone else will be waiting until morning at least.

It has not been a very productive afternoon for birding, but we have got our only target and had an amazing adventure to boot. We've not even really lost much birding time!

Day 16, 27/8/18, "Scratching a 10 year itch"

Over dinner after our Angi Lake adventure we have discussed our plan for today, our last morning in the Arfaks. Steve, smarting from the narrow miss of New Guinea Harpy two days ago, decides he's quite like to spend some time in Syoubri scanning for raptors. We know from Zeth that Harpies often cruise by or even perch near the village in the hope of nabbing one of the domestic chickens for an easy meal. The word is the best chance would be 7-9 in the morning. Jon decides to join Steve. On the other hand, I have still not had the kind of views I'd like of Magnificent Bird of Paradise, despite now having seen and heard several, both here and 10 years ago. Shita arranges for Alvin to drop me at the Mag BoP hide and then return to take the others to Syoubri for a couple of hours.

A Sooty Owl is calling again this morning as I rise, but it's a bird only Jon now needs and he's still asleep, with Steve and Jon having a relative lie in this morning. I drive down with Benny to the Mag BoP site and the two of us are set up in the hide as dawn breaks. Not long after we hear a **Magnificent Bird of Paradise** and locate it on a branch at the back of the display area. It seems pretty relaxed and in no hurry, spending ages preening, testing its golden "ruff" feathers that puff out during display, and generally making itself beautiful for the ladies. Eventually it drops down to the display court and clears away a few leaves that have fallen. House-keeping done, he returns to his perch, but when a female arrives he drops down the display court again and begins a bit of a routine. Finally I have the kind of views and photos that I have desired since I ticked it off in 2008.





I am satisfied that I've made a good call and fairly comfortable that I'll be ok even if they have seen a Harpy. Benny and I leave the hide and bird on our way back to the road through gardens. Benny hears a White-eared Bronze –cuckoo, perhaps the best looking of this family, but I don't have the call to try and entice it to show itself. Likewise, Black-eared Catbird, true to its behaviour over the last couple of days is incredibly vocal but keeps out of sight. It is quite birdy as we walk up and I manage to see a few birds that are missing from the trip list, including the common and vocal but hard-to-see **Long-billed Honeyeater**, and I have my first views of **Elfin Myzomela** and **Hooded Pitohui**.

Up at the road, the vehicle is of course with Steve and Jon, so I have no choice but to wait and bird from the roadside. It is still fairly early and cool and there is a good level of activity. Best of all, Benny suddenly exclaims, and has found a **Goldenface** in a bare tree. I try to snare a record shot, but it flies. However on this occasion it flies to a shrub only about 10m in front of us and it and another spend the next few minutes feeding. They are joined by a **Pygmy Drongo** and a **Fantailed Monarch** in the same tree. We also have a **Papuan Sittella** and some **Fairy Lorikeets** bomb across the road.



The others duly arrive at around 9.40 and are probably gripped off to learn I've had a good bird-filled few hours. They have seen almost nothing – theirs was always a high risk strategy. We try to bring the Goldenface back, because Jon really still needs a decent look even if he has ticked off stringy views a few days ago. Sadly they are no longer in the area. We do have a nice time birding the nearby trails again, though with **Boyer's Cuckooshrike**, **Magnificent Bird of Paradise** (decent looks in a fruiting tree, though nothing to compare with my views from the hide), **Spectacled Longbill**, **Mid-mountain Berrypecker**, **Great** and **Black-billed Cuckoo-doves** and **Moluccan King Parrot**.

After lunch we load up the Hiluxes and drive slowly (there is no other way) down to Manokwari, stopping and birding at various spots along the way. We do well for Longbills, picking up **Spectacled** (again) and **Pygmy Longbill** (also known as Dwarf Honeyeater). Benny is pulling out all stops to try and get Jon a Goldenface, trying every time we stop and rushing into the forest if there is any hint of response. I try to help find one, but it's hard to keep the motivation up for this bird that I have seen so well earlier, and which is proving so elusive and time-consuming as we descend. Jon gets more snatched views as it moves about the canopy and will have to settle for this.

A key bird we do see well on the drive down is **White-faced Robin**. A couple give us the run-around but we nail them down eventually. They are also found in northern Queensland but I was keen to see this life bird and I am last to get on them. Various other nice taxa make it onto our day-lists, including **Island Leaf-warbler**, **Black-winged Monarch**, **Ochre-collared Monarch**, **Red Myzomela**, **Fairy Lorikeet**, **Papuan Mountain Pigeon** and **Rufous-bellied Kookaburra**.

The afternoon is drawing on by the time we reach lower elevations where we hope for Wallace's Fairywren but it's not a good time of day – we have probably chewed too much valuable time trying for birds like Goldenface and White-faced Robin – and we do not have a sniff. It is great, though, to see so many Blyth's Hornbills, a good indicator of the quality of the forest that is still here – for now, at least.

Shita drops us at a nice looking resort hotel near the coast and airport and goes home for the night. A few minutes later there is a knock on my hotel door and a porter delivers a plastic bag with 12 cans of Bintang that Shita has just purchased from the local police station. We're told we are not allowed to drink it in public, only in our rooms. The solution of the big rude Englishmen is to decant it into water bottles to enjoy with our restaurant fare as we do our final bird-call for the Arfaks. Tomorrow we will be heading for Waigeo, and we hope, for an appointment with Mr Wilson.



Day 17, 28/7/18, "Welcome home, Benny"

We have – by the standards of the last few weeks anyway — a crazily late rise in Manokwari, handing our bags to Shita and Benny for airport check-in at 7am, then a leisurely breakfast. One of the marvellous little luxuries that Shita has spoiled us with is that she has handled check-in for every flight for us – we hand over bags and passports, and have a meal or even a beer while she takes care of the waiting around and queues and stress. We rock up just in time to be handed boarding passes, clear security and get on a plane. I could get far too used to this.

Today, though, we fail to avoid all of the stress involved with flying. Our flight time comes and goes and there is no sign of a plane. A significant delay this morning could have major knock-on effects — we have a ferry to catch in Sorong and if we aren't there in time we will lose pretty-much an entire day and one of only 3 nights in our next destination, the island of Waigeo in the Raja Ampat archipelago. Even as time ticks on Shita seems fairly relaxed, so I do not stress too much but my mental calculation suggest we are now cutting it fine if we don't leave in the next half an hour. At seemingly the last possible moment for us, our plane arrives in Manokwari, we are called to board and then we are underway for Sorong.

We've actually made up a bit of lost time, so once we are in Sorong, Shita sends us to a local hotel where we drink beer and eat pizza (yep, first meal without rice, and first cheese in 3 weeks) while she takes care of the logistics of our ferry ride to Waigeo. When the moment is just right, we get a call to pile into a car, and are whisked to the port. We stroll down the bustling jetty and straight onto a comfortable fast ferry.



Once we have cleared the mainland and are in open water the captain is happy for us to go outside onto the bows. Steve and Jon stay to bird in case of petrels or shearwaters while I doze inside until woken by Steve calling – they have just seen a **Bulwer's Petrel**. I head outside just as another petrel crosses the bows, though I cannot claim to have got enough on it. We do have **Lesser Frigatebirds** and **Brown Booby** before we get to the port in Waigeo.

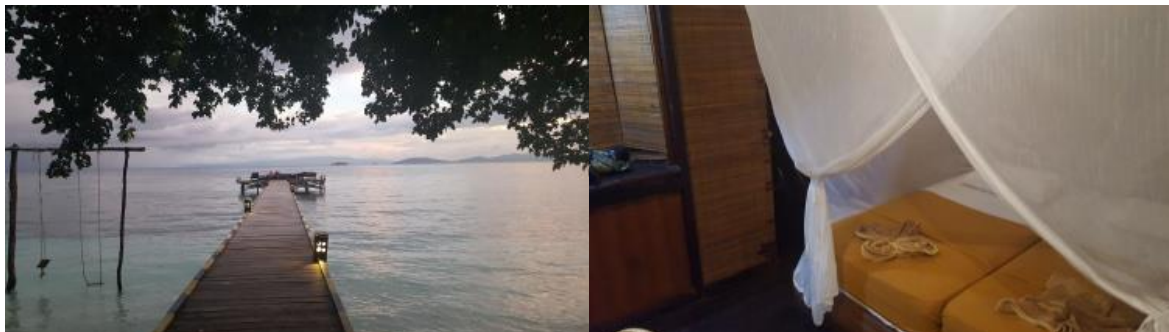
It is 16.30 and our bags are whisked by speedboat to the resort where we will spend the next 3 nights. We climb into cars and drive a windy road through the hills, picking up a good selection of lowland birds along the way.

Some are common birds we've seen in Nimbokrang, such as **Red-cheeked Parrot**, **Pinon Imperial Pigeon**, **Dollarbird** and **Brahminy Kite**. But at a couple of stops it is very birdy and we have some excellent encounters with **Great-billed Parrot** flying over, a massive **Palm Cockatoo**, and **Whiskered Treeswift**. We track down a couple of **Claret-breasted Fruit-doves**, a **Papuan Cicadabird**, and find a **Lowland Peltops** so Steve is able to grip that one back. Best of all we have a few flyover **Red Bird**



of Paradise. Red BoP – a member of the “classic” Paradisaea, plumed bird of paradise family that includes Raggiana, Greater, and Lesser – is endemic to Raja Ampat so is one of our main targets. Initially we see a few females and then I see a male, whose long, bushy red plumes trap the late afternoon sunlight as it bounds across the clearing in front of us, ridiculous wiry tail streamers dangling and wobbling behind.

Most punters arrive at the Raja Ampat Dive Resort by boat, but we have come via the tradesman's entrance and have to clamber down a steep trail and steps to arrive at a stunning beach-front resort surrounded by forest and palm trees. My room is basic, but just gorgeous, with a comfortable bed, decent shower, and a balcony that looks out over the bay, water so clear I can see the reef beneath.



As we unpack and settle in, clouds gather and by the time I am ready to walk the short distance to the open-air restaurant to join the others for a beer (yes, we are finally in a place where we can openly buy and consume the amber nectar) a massive thunderstorm has unleashed itself. It will rain heavily for the next couple of hours. No matter, as long as it's dry tomorrow... There is some bad news though: the Ducking Futch are here too!

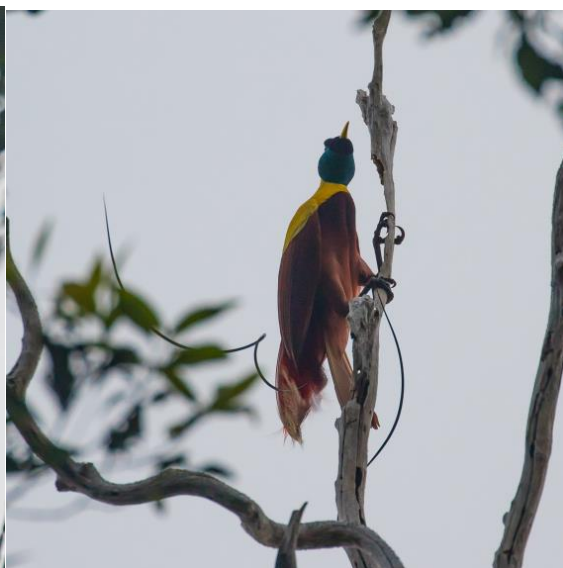
Day 18, 29/7/18, "How do you do, Mr Wilson?"

Wilson's Bird of Paradise is considered by some to be the best bird in the world. It certainly has a good case: it is rare, found only in Raja Ampat; it is amazing looking, bedecked in stunning primary colours; and it has a fabulous display. Until recently it was also very difficult to see. The only known accessible sites were in the island of Batanta at 400m a.s.l. involving a long steep trek in the dark for anyone who wanted to witness Mr Wilson at his display site. Only in the last few years has there been ferry transport to Waigeo where there is less logging pressure and Wilson's can even be found at sea level. It's still not easy to get to – by today, Day 18, I've undertaken 7 flights and a 2 hour ferry ride – but at least we know there will be no more muddy trails.

Before heading to look for Wilson's, we have two other targets. We drive a short distance from our resort before dawn and manage to find a **Papuan Boobook**. I grab a record shot of the cute chocolatey *Ninox* this time, but we cannot encourage it to come close to us.



Next stop is a display tree of Red Bird of Paradise. The view requires us to crane our necks (we are used to this by now, and I am sure the muscles in my neck bulge like a weight-lifter's biceps), and they keep us waiting for a while. First on the scene is a **Glossy-mantled Manucode**, but at 6am a male **Red BoP** arrives. It spends quite a while sitting and preening itself semi-obscured, but once a couple of other birds arrive in the neighbouring trees it moves to its favourite display post and poses nicely, as well as dancing on the pole and shimmering its wings. The others fail to join it for a full lek, but we are happy to leave in the knowledge we still have the day's main course to come.





We drive a short distance through secondary forest until we pull up a few minutes before 7.30. Much of this area is Benny's land – his home is the next village after the resort – but to spread the love and make sure everyone benefits from eco-tourism Benny and Shita have brought us not to his own, but his neighbour's hide. We walk a short distance through the forest to a nicely built hide and within seconds a stunning male **Wilson's Bird of Paradise** drops from bushes at the back of his display court: "Mr Wilson will see you now..." This is all so fast! In a panic I fail to adjust my camera settings and grab only 4 horribly blurred pictures before he disappears.

Fortunately he is not long gone and when he returns we are treated to yet another trip highlight. For more than half an hour he zips around his court displaying to at least 2 females in attendance. His primary colours are so bold and pure that it's almost like a child has been asked to colour him in. The dominant colour is red, all over his body and back apart from a bright yellow circle on his neck that he shows off by crouching on the ground, kinking his neck and pushing his head down to the ground. His head is bright blue, bare, wrinkled skin like a blue brain, seemingly held in place by a black "cage". The black of his underparts is so black I am unable to bring any feather detail out even post-processing my pictures – it has sucked all the light into it. His tail is a similar shape to Magnificent BoP, but thicker, like a thin tape rather than a wire. Several times he poses vertically low on a favourite post, and fans his neck out to show the female on the stick above.



Louisa's reaction when she sees my photo of the displaying bird: "it looks like an Aboriginal flag". She has a point:



During the display a **Dusky Scrubfowl** calls and I see it moving to the right if the display court in dense scrub. The view is poor, and much as I would like to see this, the spectacle of the world's best bird performing a few metres in front of us somehow draws the attention away. In any case we later see a Scrubfowl from the road. After an nearly an hour with Mr Wilson, the females have departed and he has retreated to the side of his display court to keep an eye on things. We turn to Benny and our local host to ask about our next target, Western Crowned Pigeon, or Mambruk. Our local guy is telling us that he has regularly been seeing them at a fruiting tree about 100m from here, when within seconds, we hear one that sounds like its coming from exactly the spot just described.

We follow Benny through the forest and sure enough his hunter's eyes pick out a superb **Western Crowned Pigeon** on the ground. We all have good views but it slides away through the forest before we are sated or have even record shots. We give chase hoping that it will flush up to a tree for better views, but it stays on the ground and manages to elude us. Never mind.

Back on the road we bird on foot continuing to pick up goodies. **Common Paradise Kingfisher** calls but as we found in Nimbokrang, is a bugger to see. **Yellow-breasted Boatbill** is a lifer for me, even though it is found in Australia. **Papuan Pitta** is also found in far north Queensland but this is not a lifer for me – I had an epic encounter with one in the Adelbert Mountains in 2008. But any day you see a pitta is probably a good day, so I call back to it by whistling through saliva collected in the back of my throat to get a suitable warble. Amazingly this is answered and not long after guess who — Benny — finds it out for us. A fantastic bird to have on the trip list, though it can't often be the case that a pitta fails to break into the list of top birds you've seen in the last 3 hours.

We have more endemics to look for and pretty soon we get good views of **Raja Ampat Pitohui**. They respond well to Benny's whistles but are flying around excitedly and rarely stop so it takes me a while to get views I am happy with. Then another goody – our first perched **Papuan Dwarf Kingfisher**!



We are back in the lowlands and consequently by 10am it is oppressively hot and humid and bird activity is much reduced. We start walking back to the cars when Benny calls: Mambruk! There is one on the road ahead of us. We follow at pace as it walks away from us, even breaking into a jog – this seems to be the accepted technique and apparently often results in a bird that will stop and watch you, or fly to a perch from which it can be viewed. But

sadly for us this bird slides off the track into the forest and we cannot relocate it.

It has been a stellar morning. Back at the resort we swim in balmy, clear water and allow ourselves a few beers and a post-prandial Nanna-nap as a treat. Trudging up and down the Ibele Trail in the dark and cold and rain Steve Young said “Let no man call this a bloody holiday”. That seems a lifetime ago now that we have all our targets under the belt. We risk the wrath of families by taking a self-indulgent celebratory selfie and posting one of the few facebook updates of the trip.



Mission accomplished

But this is a birding trip and if you snooze, you lose. At 3pm, I emerge from my nap onto the balcony to see the resort owner looking up into a tree outside my hut. I grab optics and join him — a pair of **Papuan Frogmouths** is roosting a few metres away from my hotel room. What a nice relaxing way to grab a lifer! I’d been hoping for this but expecting to have to head into the forest after dark.

Jon needs Beach Kingfisher, and I have heard one shuttling back and forth as I’ve been dozing. We walk along the beach in search of it, first finding a **Sacred Kingfisher**, then two **Beach Kingfishers**.



At 4pm we drive a short way to some gardens and scrubbing forest at the back of one of the dive resorts. We are hoping for Golden Monarch. Though we dip on that we do have an female **Frilled Monarch** and lifer **Spot-winged Monarch** (another species also found in Qld). A few **Rufous-bellied Kookaburra** are conspicuous, then back on the road we see **Eclectus Parrot**, **Shining Flycatcher** and **Ruby-throated Myzomela**.

We have one more target in mind, and travel a bit deeper into the forest on the route we took to see Mr Wilson's this morning. We stop at a spot known to Benny and play a call we are familiar with and have heard regularly in the lowlands: **Hook-billed Kingfisher**, a crepuscular stonker that can be a bugger to see. Steve and I ticked it off in '08 when his eagle-eyes picked out a distant silhouette at dusk in the Adelberts. Shita assures us that from time to time you can come across a responsive bird in the daytime. And today our luck is clearly in. A bird responds and then – yet again – Benny is onto it through the smallest obscured window.



What a day: **Wilson's Bird of Paradise, Red Bird of Paradise, Western Crowned Pigeon, Papuan Pitta, Raja Ampat Pitohui, Papuan Dwarf Kingfisher, Beach Kingfisher, Hook-billed Kingfisher, Papuan Boobook and Papuan Frogmouth.** Back at the resort we again reward ourselves with beer and tuck into the fantastic freshly caught and grilled reef fish on the buffet before the Ducking Futch can beat us to it.

Day 19, 30/7/18, "Winding down"

We begin the morning by returning to the narrow dirt roads above the resort where yesterday we had such a good time with Red BoP, Wilson's etc. We're hoping to find some of the less iconic species that we neglected yesterday, and I'm also keen to get better photos of Mambruk. In my trip notes on the day I described it as "birding Benny's forest for various padders".

As we pull up a few birds are hawking high above our heads – I'm surprised to discover they are **Dollarbirds**. Two new birds for the trip are **Black Berrypecker** (female) and **Rusty Pitohui**. We hear **Papuan Pitta, Hooded Butcherbird** and **Rusty Mouse-warbler** but do not try for them. But we do find another **Western Crowned Pigeon**. I still don't get the frame-filling pictures that I want, or that we managed of Victoria's, because the view down the road is a fair way off, but at least this bird is not pictured running away!



The only new additions to the trip list over the next two hours are **Olive Honeyeater** and **Barred Cuckooshrike**. The former we have probably in fact already seen, but we only realise this following some expert detective work from Jon the previous night. We also have yet another encounter with a **Western Crowned Pigeon**, our 4th in two mornings — they are positively common, here. We follow it walking for a couple of hundred metres or more along a broad forest walking trail. When we reach the end of the trail it does flush, and we follow it to a big tree. Just as it looks like it will land there for superb views I see it bank away at the last minute and fly much further, out of sight.

As we drive back to the resort a few **Pied Imperial Pigeon** fly past. This a widespread attractive pigeon that I have never run into before, so it's nice to round out our "mainland" Waigeo birding with a lifer.

The plan for the rest of the day is to head over to another resort on the neighbouring island of Mansuar, exploring some of the smaller outcrops of Raja Ampat.

It will be a nice change from the forest to be pottering about in a boat, though wind has picked up and along with it the swell.



Once we are loaded onto the dive boat we set out at around 11, taking about 40 minutes to cross to the islet of Mioskon. We explore the beach (leeward) side of the islet on foot, finding **Varied Honeyeater** (another Australian species that is a lifer for me) and a couple of **Black-faced Cuckooshrikes** (amazingly these are a lifer for Shita, though I will see one in my street a few doors up from home the week I return to Adelaide), but we do not connect with the key target here. Metallic Pigeons have been known to roost in the palms, but can be hit and miss. This was pretty-much my only dip on New Caledonia last year, so much wanted, but today they are still a "miss". We circle the island in the boat, finding a couple of **Bridled Terns**, a **Brahminy Kite** and some **White-breasted Woodswallow** but no pigeons of any sort.



At 12.30 we arrive at the small, upmarket Sorido Bay Resort on Kri Island. It is owned by Max Ammer, pioneer of dive resorts and eco-tourism in Raja Ampat. Naturally, he is good friends with Shita and it is her connection that has managed to bring us here today despite the restaurant being

fully booked for lunch – Max insists that he can make room for our small, exclusive group! We arrive around noon and are immediately presented with two options: try to get one or two of the birding targets in the bag before lunch is served, or chat with Max over a beer. We are all in wind-down mode so even though there are potential lifers at stake, they are all (more or less) padders, so no prizes for guessing which we choose!



Max regales us with stories of hosting Attenborough and the BBC, Jared Diamond, Tim Laman and others, and of his ongoing plans for eco-tourism in the region. In fact a BBC crew is due in tomorrow, and sure enough as we are talking to Max an English chap beckons Shita over. We find out later he is the BBC's Natural History Unit's rope expert and knows Shita from multiple previous trips. Max's charm and accented English, as well as the tropical island surroundings put us in mind of a Bond villain. We half expect a long-haired white cat to jump in his lap any moment, and when we discover that the resort has a private helipad in a clearing higher up in the forest, we start imagining underground labs and world-domination technology – perhaps the mountain will open up in front of us any minute.

The last three weeks have been some of the best for birding – probably the best – in my 20 year birding career, but I'd struggle to convince the family to join me for a holiday in any of the places we have been. But Max's place is different – comfortable but idyllic and way off the usual tourist trail. I can imagine Nikki lying on the beach and drinking cocktails at sunset while the girls and I go off snorkeling or diving. Maybe one day...

When lunch is served it is a great spread and we indulge in more beers all round. Afterwards, left to my own devices I would certainly have had a nap, but we have birds to see. We wander out the back past the kitchen and immediately find Max's pets that he has been telling us about: a pair of young **Southern Cassowaries** that he rescued and had flown out here is completely habituated to humans and they are resting in the shade. In the same area we find a pair of **Raja Shelduck**.



Walking along the boardwalk behind the beachfront accommodation we hear a **Common Paradise Kingfisher**. Like many birds on small islands, these are much less shy than their mainland counterparts, and we finally have stunning views of this mega bird.



Beyond the resort on a forest trail that connects Sorido Bay Resort to its lower-brow, more basic cousin, Kri Island Resort, we see **Eastern Koel** and **Red-bellied Kookaburra**, and a **Spice Imperial Pigeon** that Steve finds on a distant hillside. But there are lots of mosquitos (I failed to apply my DEET after lunch and now regret that omission), and it's not very birdy. This is probably because of the time of day, but it might also have something to do with us being somewhat mentally switched off. After an hour or so of largely birdless flogging about in the heat we make our way back to the resort. We could keep on birding, but both Steve and I – and probably Jon (I'm not sure we ever asked!) – are keen to at least try some snorkeling given that we are in one of the world's most famous dive/snorkeling areas.



At 4pm we bid goodbye to Max and power our way to another island. En route Shita points out a village where Alfred Wallace spent a lot of time studying the New Guinea birds leading up to proposing the Theory of Evolution by Natural Selection (conceived independently of Darwin). Opposite this village, but next to a cliff on a much smaller island we pull up and four of us – me, Steve, Jon and Benny – jump into the water and spend a fantastic hour exploring the reef here. I have snorkeled (and also dived once) at places like Michaelmas Cay on the Great Barrier Reef, Ningaloo Reef in WA's northwest, Rottnest Island of course, and most recently in New Caledonia, but here is the greatest diversity of coral and fish I have ever seen. Dozens of different corals are jammed together along the reef, and hundreds of colourful fish of all shapes, sizes and colours are all around. Of the few I can identify, a **Black-tipped Shark** cruises the drop-off, **Parrotfish** munch at the coral (and defecate sand), a massive **Grouper** glides out from under an overhang, and I find a couple of **Clown Fish** hiding, as they do, in a **Sea Anemone**. If I actually knew what I was looking at I'd probably have picked up 50+ lifers in a very short space of time (though this is also partly the reason I have not ever gone the whole hog to get PADI qualifications – how would I have time for this and birding?). Leaving Adelaide nearly 4 weeks ago I ummed-and-ahhed about stashing the GoPro in my luggage and decided against it on the basis of lack of use and weight. But now I regret the decision, even if this would have been its only use in 4 weeks. Next time?



Back in the boat our pilot takes us on a tour of the east side of Gam Island and into the narrow channel that separates Gam from Waigeo. The coast is dotted with tiny islets and outcrops, all covered in forest and eroded by the sea underneath making them look like mushrooms. A **Manta-ray** surfaces close to the boat, but we are travelling at speed on the smooth sheltered water so it's gone as soon as it's found. Close to a few of the larger islets we slow and find lots more **Spice Imperial Pigeon** roosting on the numerous tiny outcrops. Close to sunset a **Violet-necked Lory** flies over from Gam to Waigeo but I don't get onto it – it will have to wait for a visit to Halmahera!



We have stayed out in the boat deliberately late because not far from here another islet is a regular **Great-billed Parrot** roost. We count over 300 that come to roost, though this is an alarmingly low number according to Shita – they have had 3-4 times that in relatively recent years gone by. It is almost completely dark by the time we head for home, and I admit to some nerves at the technique: as we zoom along at what feels like 20-30 knots, the deckie is on the bow waving his torch to try to spot any floating debris. We have seen some sizeable logs floating and it would be a disaster – and in the dark and a long way from any help maybe even fatal – if we were to hit something and damage the hull. We make it back to Raja Ampat Dive Resort unscathed and after another great buffet of various local dishes including the day's freshly caught reef fish, we retire for our final night on Waigeo.



Day 20, 31/7/18, “The beginning of the end”

Our penultimate day is mostly a travel day, so not really a lot to report. It starts – like our previous 2 days – with a great breakfast at Raja Ampat Dive Resort. In fact, overall we have eaten amazingly well on this trip, even when at our remotest locations like Lake Habema and at Zeth’s camp in the Arfaks. I had expected to be overdosing on tasteless yams, yet we have had a great diversity of tasty dishes everywhere – a testament to Shita’s planning and the fantastic hospitality and ingenuity of the locals. After brekkie we finalise our packing and board a dive boat for a 25min journey to the port. It’s pretty choppy once we leave the jetty. Our pilot does his best to ride the waves, but misjudges a few and Shita and Benny, sitting windward side, get absolutely soaked.

Our ferry ride back to Sorong is uneventful (and birdless) and we find ourselves back at the Swissshotel eating pizza and drinking beer once more as Shita makes arrangements for our final bit of birding for the trip. We load up cars and head a couple of hours away from Sorong to some nice lowland forest (those two adjectives, “nice” and “lowland” are not often used together to describe forest anywhere in South East Asia in 2018!).

Immediately we find some trip ticks in this new habitat, with **Yellow-billed Longbill** and **Black Cicadabird** (both male and female) before setting out on a long walk along a muddy but broad, well defined forest trail. We are not far into this walk when we hear **Red-breasted Paradise Kingfisher**, arguably the key local specialty. It is distant and doesn’t respond, but a few minutes later one is much closer. Benny is straight onto it and for once I too am both in the right place and on the ball, and I grab great views of the cracker. I am loath to go for camera before the others get on it, but as we are trying to give directions to Steve it flies off. Bugger! It calls from deeper in the forest so we have no choice but to go in. It is still calling, and continues even as we get closer by pushing through the dense vines. It is still a bastard to see – they are not especially skulking, but they just sit still and if the angle is wrong you have no chance. Fortunately Steve is on the case (perhaps concentration focused from his dip 5 minutes ago) and he finds it perched in the open but unobtrusively. We all score great views and decent enough pictures considering how dark the forest is.



We see little to raise the pulse-rate over the next 90 minutes as we walk through the forest until we reach a pretty village in a clearing, where we will be spending the night in fairly basic accommodation tonight. As we enjoy dinner, **Ivory-billed Coucal** (also known as Great Black) and **Hook-billed Kingfishers** call, and a pair of **Papuan Nightjars** flies around the clearing. As we are heading for bed a **Papuan Frogmouth** calls and later tonight, as I lie awake in bed, I hear the first unequivocal **Papuan Hawk-owl** of the trip.



We emerge after 2 hours flog along a muddy trail to a pretty village in a forest clearing.

Day 21, 1/8/18, "The End"

Fifteen years after first planning a trip to New Guinea (more than 20 for Steve), and an even decade after actually getting to this amazing island, we have just about come to the end of an amazing trip that has finally delivered the "Full Attenborough". The highlights reel is extensive, with displaying Twelve-wired, Red BoP, Superb BoP, Black Sicklebill, Western Parotia, Wilson's BoP and Vogelkop Bowerbird, fabulous encounters with Crowned Pigeons, Paradise Kingfishers and Owlet-nightjars, and throughout great company, laughs and pretty-much flawless logistics. The birding gods have truly smiled on our team for the last 3 weeks. The gods are, however, a fickle bunch and not quite done with us yet. They will punch me in the guts and kick me in the knackers before the morning is out.

After an early breakfast we hang around the village to pick up a few new birds. The main target this morning is **Black Lory**; several parties of between 2 and a dozen birds shuttle back and forth across the clearing. I manage some deeply underwhelming flight shots, and annoyingly when I observe four land in a palm over my head by the village school-house, my camera is 50m away and the birds have gone by the time I get it. At least this view in bins is more than a flight silhouette of an all-dark bird; they are very smart, black scalloped plumage with a red and golden tail, like a burning ember. There are dozens of **Yellow-faced Myna** in the trees at the back of the village, and nearby Benny finds a pair of **Large Fig-Parrots**. We hear various goodies such as **Magnificent Riflebird** and **Twelve-wired Bird of Paradise** in the forest but we will not have time to try for them because we still have a long walk and long drive back to Sorong before an early afternoon flight to Jakarta. We rationalise not going for these birds to ourselves – this morning is really just a bonus that Shita has arranged last-minute to use up the final few hours, so there is no point getting in a tizz about missing stuff. The greatest excitement comes early on as we are finishing breakfast – a young Northern Cassowary appears in the clearing and wanders over towards us. This would be a total mega and an amazing

way to end the trip, except that we have already been warned by the villagers that, like Max on Kri Island, they have a pet Cassowary raised from an egg found in the forest. It's still a surreal and pretty special experience to have this huge bird wandering about us, even if it is "plastic" and not tickable.



We have an early afternoon flight so we have worked out we need to begin our trek back through the forest by about 7.30am to have time for a shower and general re-packing in Sorong. In fact we start the trek a little later than planned, closer to 8am, and Steve and Jon set a cracking pace, perhaps nervous that we have eaten into our buffer time. I hang back – I don't see a lot of point in going any faster than Shita and Benny, and their familiarity with the local bird calls may well still pull out a few more birds. In fact about half an hour into the walk this comes to pass, when a **Yellow-billed Kingfisher** calls from almost overhead and Shita is straight on it. I get nice views and some passable record shots. I call out to the



others but they are already too far up the track and it is gone before we can fetch them back. It's not a disaster, because neither needs it other than as a nice trip tick.

About 10 minutes later we do finally catch up with them. They have stopped rest, or perhaps just realised the futility of steaming off when they'll just have to wait at the cars. When we set out again Jon points down at the ground – a fresh set of Cassowary tracks leads off into the forest. It is an omen that I do not heed.

Twenty minutes later we are all pretty-much in non-birding mode, concentrating on getting back to the cars. We are strung out on the trail when suddenly Benny, now at the front of the group, arrests and cries out: "Cassowary! On the track". He is some 15m ahead of me, and I guess the bird itself is 30-40m further on. Jon, as usual, has the fortune to be in the right place, this time on Benny's shoulder, and has seen the adult **Northern Cassowary** walk off the track into the forest. Steve sees the back half of the bird and I hear him say it's moving off through the forest. Several metres back I can hear the excitement but see nothing.

We rush off in the hope of catching up with it but the forest is dark and dense and it can move much more quickly than us. After 10mins we give up – we have run out of time, but it is probably futile anyway. I feel like I have been punched in the guts and the wind has been taken completely out of me. Steve, who I find out later has seen the back half of the bird but not the head, feels the same. We trudge the remaining 20mins back to the cars numb, and then drive in virtual silence to Sorong.

Maybe I just needed that quiet time, but once showered and packed I'm able to rationalise the unexpected but no less hurtful dip right at end of the trip, and my mood has picked up in time for farewells at the airport. We met Shita and Benny 3 weeks ago as guides and clients, but I am sure we are now parting as friends.



It's another 5 hours to Jakarta from Sorong, via a stop in Makassar (how tantalising it is to be on the ground in Sulawesi but have no opportunity for birding). We check into the same cheap airport hotel that I used on my way out 3 weeks ago. It might be fun to head downtown, but we find out that it will be an hour and a half by taxi, so 3 hours overall in a car, just for a few beers. Instead we head next door to a slightly more upmarket hotel for a few beers, and then to another even slightly more upmarket hotel where we have our last meal together. After a few drinks before dinner, and more with the meal, nature calls. Steve heads for the gents first and returns with a cryptic message about making sure to get the right room. When the time comes for me too, to break the seal, I wander in the direction of the gents and down the corridor. In front of me I can see a stainless trough along the wall and recognise this as one of those long sports stadium urinals. But then I glance to my right and see some shoes on the ground, and then further over some mats; just in time I realise that the steel on the wall is just decorative, and I have walked not into the toilet but the prayer room. If Islamic law punishes theft by cutting off your hand, I wince at what the punishment for peeing in the prayer room is.

More than a month later, now 15th September, I have just about come to the end of this blog. I almost feel a sense of loss – maybe even more than I felt when saying goodbye to the guys early morning on 2nd August – because I can no longer relive it vicariously through writing about it. I do still have 3000 of my pics and 3500 of Steve's to get through. It might take me some time...

