

CSIRO Publishing

Emu



Volume 97, 1997
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Birds Australia

Published by CSIRO Publishing
for the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union

www.publish.csiro.au/journals/emu

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BIRDING INDONESIA: A BIRD-WATCHER'S GUIDE TO THE WORLD'S LARGEST ARCHIPELAGO

by P. Jepson and R. Ounsted (Editors)

1997. *Periplus Editions, Singapore*. Pp. 314, 130 photographs, 28 maps. No price given.

My first reaction upon seeing this book was to exclaim, wow! One cannot help but be excited by the book's exuberant vitality largely resulting from the inclusion of some really good, refreshingly new photographs (seemingly mostly taken in the wild) which are beautifully packaged in a thoroughly attractive and very professional production. Periplus, a Singapore-based publishing house, have already made a very favourable name for the originality and excellence of their high-quality travel guides, especially those dealing with the many islands of Indonesia. *Birding Indonesia* can only further enhance their reputation.

Frankly this birding guide leaves all others for dead. Not only does this guide look good but it feels good and is of sufficiently convenient size that it will easily find its way into any sensible bird-watcher traveller's pack. Within a total of 314 pages including 130+ colour photographs and 28 nicely executed maps. *Birding Indonesia* offers a primer to birding the world's largest archipelago of some 1700+ islands. Thus, it deals with 1500+ birds of which 381 are endemic to Indonesia including 135 (one almost certainly extinct) that are currently classified as threatened (Collar et al. 1994). It is, however, much more than a 'where to see this bird and that bird' book. Richly endowed with solid practical information on how to travel in Indonesia and liberally illustrated with some mouth-watering photographs, mostly by the peripatetic Alain Compost — the close shot of the ruby-throated race of the Black-crested Bulbul and two of the endangered Storm's Storks feeding at a forested pool are especially outstanding — this book will surely appeal to a much wider audience than just the birding fraternity. Boy, what I would have given to have something half as good as this when I first began to explore Indonesia in the dark days of 1981!

My only substantial criticism is that although the maps are of a very high quality they are, in the main, just too generalised to be really helpful to the visiting birder. For example, if you don't know exactly how to get to Bipolo lowland forest in West Timor it is very unlikely your driver will. Furthermore, you will almost

certainly need a good four-wheel-drive vehicle to get you to Bipolo as you will for accessing the relatively poorly explored Mt. Mutis. Similar lack of detail characterises many of the smaller island accounts and one can only surmise that inclusion of such detail would have added substantially to the size of the book and thereby added to what is a very reasonably priced publication.

The section on Irian Jaya is notably 'thin' compared to those dealing with the islands of Wallacea and the Greater Sundas. This almost certainly reflects the lack of experience of this region by the primary author. This is particularly disappointing, as in many ways there is much less available information on this still predominantly wonderful tropical wilderness than the rest of Indonesia. One astonishing omission is that of Biak Island. Although included in the practicalities section at the back, *Birding Indonesia* was an excellent opportunity to really put this, the most endemic-rich of New Guinea's satellite islands, on the map. Perhaps most importantly, a major opportunity to promote the conservation of what is clearly the single most threatened site in the Irian Jaya region has gone begging. This tiny oceanic island has at one time or another served as an international airport and the recent construction there of a four star resort hotel suggests this may well again be the case. Biak supports 8-10 endemics including the lovely but threatened Biak Red Lory *Eos cyanogonia*, the spectacular Biak Paradise-Kingfisher *Tanysiptera riedelli* and the distinctive Long-tailed Starling *Aplonis magna* in addition to a number of notably localised species more easy to see on Biak than elsewhere, e.g. Yellow-bibbed Fruit-Dove *Ptilinopus solomonensis* and Spice Imperial Pigeon *Ducula myristicivora*. Clearly Biak is a must for the discerning birder.

Notwithstanding my remarks about the section on Irian Jaya, any self respecting birder (even if they have no current plans to visit Indonesia) should obtain a copy of this excellent book. If nothing else *Birding Indonesia* sets the benchmark for all future productions of this genre. As a by-product, largely resulting from its very attractive production, it is a wonderful vehicle for conservation and advertisement for Indonesia. Hopefully an Indonesian version will follow shortly; the growing nucleus of Indonesian birdwatchers will certainly appreciate it.

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