

non-flammable vegetation that impede the spread of fire. Similarly the rivers to the west of the Atherton Tableland, where the subspecies also persists, are probably large enough to stop fires, and the area is extensively subdivided by roads and cultivation. In central Cape York Peninsula, however, there are few roads, most vegetation is flammable and most watercourses are dry by the late dry season. Thus, any fires that get away can burn unchecked over larger areas than elsewhere in the treecreeper's range. The re-establishment of the Black Treecreeper through its former range and its protection in its current habitat may therefore depend on the re-introduction of a fire regime that ensures a fine-grained mosaic of burning.

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Yellow-eyed Starling *Aplonis mystacea* in Central Province, Papua New Guinea

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The Yellow-eyed Starling *Aplonis mystacea* is one of New Guinea's little-known birds (Ogilvie-Grant 1915; Mayr 1941; Amadon 1962; Rand & Gilliard 1967; Beehler et al. 1986; Coates 1990). It has been reported from only four widely-spaced geographic areas (Fig. 1), two in Irian Jaya (a: Wanggar River; b: Mimika River), and two in Papua New Guinea (c: Kumaio, middle Turama River; and d: the upper Fly drainage: Kiunga, Tabubil, Oroville Camp, Black River, and 5 miles

below Palmer Junction) [Ogilvie-Grant 1913; Stein 1936; Rand 1938, 1942; Diamond & Raga 1976; Coates 1990; Burrows 1993; M. LeCroy *in litt.*; J.M. Diamond *in litt.*].

Herein we report observing the species on the Nagore (= Chisholm) River, Central Province, 7°54'S, 146°33'E, c. 70 m asl. This new sighting extends the species' range ESE by 330 km, and suggests that this little-known starling is more widespread than previous-

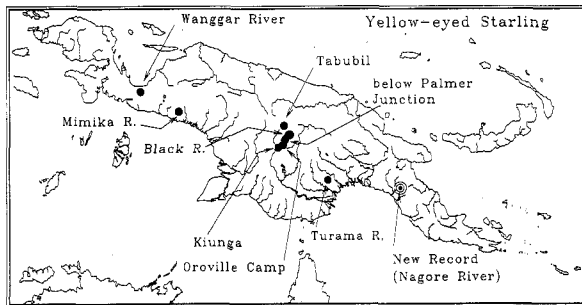


Figure 1 Map of New Guinea showing published distributional records for the Yellow-eyed Starling.

ly recognised. Furthermore, our observations suggest that the Yellow-eyed Starling may be overlooked by ornithologists in the field and that a concerted effort is needed to properly delineate its true range.

In collaboration with several other fieldworkers based at a research camp on the Nagore River, in July–August 1993 BMB and RB assisted with a day-long observation of birds feeding on the fruits of a 40 m-high *Endospermum moluccanum* (Euphorbiaceae), one of the more common canopy trees in the lowland alluvial forest of the study area. At 0928 h, BMB (the sole observer at the tree at that time) noted the arrival of a small flock of all-dark starlings in the tree's upper branches. Upon checking the birds with 10x binoculars, he noted that the birds all displayed a very pale iris. This was remarkable, as the only starling known at the site, the Metallic Starling *Aplonis metallica*, has a bright red iris, and a flock of this latter species had been foraging at the tree at 0920.

After BMB had been observing the birds for several minutes, RB arrived at the tree with a Bushnell Space-master telescope (with 22x ocular) on a tripod. BMB immediately focused the telescope on a resting bird and noted the following field characters: (1) pale yellow iris; (2) short erect feathers on the forehead above the bill, forming a small narial crest; (3) dull metallic brownish-black head distinct from the metallic green-black of the remainder of the body and wings; and (4) graduated tail, central-most feathers longest. RB confirmed these characters. The birds vocalised from the tree but no attempt was made to characterise these call notes, because they were quite similar to those of the Metallic Starling. Field notes were made from direct observation with the telescope and without consulting any reference book or guide. Subsequently we examined the pertinent illustrations and text of Beehler et al.

(1986) and confirmed that the birds in the tree were *A. mystacea*.

This small flock of c. 10 birds remained in the tree, eating fruit, resting, and preening for c. 15 min. and then departed. We noted nothing in this behaviour that would distinguish them from Metallic Starlings. Both forage for fruit in a kinetic, almost nervous, fashion, continually flitting about the top canopy, often jostling and displacing each other at favoured feeding perches. Metallic Starlings foraged in the tree before and afterward on that day, and on the next day. We had only this single encounter with the Yellow-eyed Starling over the entire four-month field season. A field season of similar length and timing in 1992 produced no observations of the species.

Several points are worth noting about this novel observation. The forest around the Nagore River camp is old-growth alluvial lowland rainforest that supports a large and conspicuous population of Metallic Starlings. At least one large and active colony of Metallic Starlings (with new nests) stood within a kilometre of the observation tree in 1993. In July 1992, we found two active colonies close at hand and J. Hagelin observed breeding activities at one of these for several weeks without ever observing Yellow-eyed Starlings. Starlings were common visitors to several species of fruit trees where we made in-depth observations in 1993 and where no Yellow-eyed Starlings were noted. It is apparent that the Yellow-eyed Starling is considerably less common than the Metallic at Nagore.

The flock of Yellow-eyes that we observed was composed entirely of adult birds (dark ventrally). At the time of our observation, it was common to see flocks of Metallics that were a mix of adult and immature plumages. Do Yellow-eyes breed in the Lakekamu–Kunimaipa Basin? This possibility is suggested by a final point. On 11 August 1979, at a field camp c. 8 km NNW of Nagore, BMB observed a flock of whitish-eyed, wedge-tailed starlings, all of which were in immature plumage, eating fruit in a *Glochidion* (Euphorbiaceae) in poorly-drained alluvial forest much like the habitat at Nagore. The iris color of young Metallic Starlings is usually red, but also has been reported as ranging from olive-grey and olive-yellow to greenish-orange or orange-red, but never whitish (Coates 1990). Adult Metallic Starlings were also observed in the tree at the time and the pale-eyed immature birds were noted but not identified. Probably these were the young of a population of Yellow-eyed Starlings that breed in the upper reaches of the Lakekamu Drainage.

The earlier sighting mentioned above makes it necessary to check closely all observations of long-tailed starlings in the lowlands between the Fly and Lakekamu rivers (Fig. 1). One must assume that the Yellow-eyed Starling, a gregarious, frugivorous and presumably mobile species, might inhabit these vast expanses of lowland forest as well. J.M. Diamond (*in litt.*) noted that in the Fly River drainage this species seemed to occur preferentially in low-lying floodplain areas and was not observed in the higher hilly areas. In contrast, Bret Whitney (*in litt.*) reported observing the species in hilly forest on the banks of the Ok Tedi River at 580 m and above Kiunga, far from any rivers, at 300 m. These latter observations indicate it is probably not strictly a riverine specialist, nor is it confined to alluvial lowlands.

Diamond (*in litt.*) noted that some of the calls of *mystacea* sounded rougher or more 'burry' than those of *metallica*. Stein (1936) also noted that the voices of the two species differed, *mystacea* having a more 'metallic' call. Whitney agrees that the voice is distinguishable, and also notes that the species is usually first detected as flocks fly over the observer (they are rarely observed perched). These points may aid field investigators in future searches for the species, whose habits and distribution remain poorly known.

Finally, we wonder about the nature of the ecological relationship between Metallic and Yellow-eyed Starlings. They have been observed together, sharing a feeding tree or sharing the same patch of forest in at least three of the localities where they both have been found (Nagore, Kiunga and Mimika). This is not too surprising, considering how widespread *metallica* is through the lowlands and hills of mainland New Guinea. By what means do the two species sort, ecologically? When one adds the new locality to its range, the distribution of *mystacea* appears relictual. Is this because it has been consistently overlooked by field observers or because it is a relict that has been unable to compete with *metallica*? The recent record by Burrows (1993) from the middle Turama, and an additional unconfirmed and unpublished sight record from Mount Bosavi from late 1993 (by J. Sengo and J. Hiaso, *vide* I. Burrows) suggest the former hypothesis. Still, it would be most interesting to study the two species' habits in sympatry.

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