

# Papua New Guinea: Bucket List Birding June 25 – July 7, 2024 | Trip Report | by Inala Guide Angus McNab



**Guide Angus McNab with participants Elizabeth, Greg, Angelita, and Craig.**



## **Tues., Jun. 25                      Cairns**

We all made it to Cairns! We met up for dinner, and after a quick meet and greet we waited a long time on dinner. It gave us time to chat and discuss the upcoming trip, and as the discussions finished, we received a text saying our flight was cancelled. Minutes later we had a new flight! So, we were back on track. It was an early evening for most after some considerable travel time.

## **Wed., Jun. 26                      Cairns to Rondon Ridge**

A 5 am pick up means an early start, but we were off to the airport and on our way to Port Moresby just after the sun came up. Grabbing our bags, we met Pieter who took us through to the domestic check in, and then through to the domestic terminal, spotting Pacific Swallows, Eurasian Tree Sparrows, and Willie Wagtails as we went. After a bit of a wait, we were on the next plane and making our way up to Mt Hagen. Joseph met us and we boarded the bus, and he drove us up the mountain. There was a few Long-tailed Shrikes, and maybe 15 Black Kites spotted during the 45-minute drive before we reached our destination.

After a quick lunch and dropping our bags, the beautiful blue sky became dark gray rain clouds, and the rain began as we started to bird. A different Joseph took us out for the afternoon, and we had Red-collared and Elfin Myzomelas from the protection of the lodge. Papuan White-eyes were spotted, and a distant Yellow-browed Melidectes was seen through the scopes. The rain cleared and we got our first bird of paradise, Greater Lophorina! A male-female pair were up in a tree with iridescent flashes of blue coming from the chest of the

male. Next, we had Blue Bird of Paradise, Princess Stephanie's Astrapia, Slaty-chinned Longbill, Red-capped Flowerpecker, a mystery parrot spotted by Greg, Amboyna Cuckoo-dove, and Island Leaf-warbler. Not a bad start to the first 2 hours.

## **Thurs., June 27                      Rondon Ridge**

This morning started early, with breakfast before the sun had come up. We headed up to the clearing above the dining room and set the theme for the day – slow and steady. It was a little quiet but birds were about. Blue Bird of Paradise, Greater Lophorina, New Guinea White-eye, and Willie Wagtail were all quickly spotted. Over the next two hours we had more of the same, with small feeding flocks including Silvereyes, Elfin Myzomela, Sepik-Ramu Shrikethrush, Brown-breasted Gerygone, and Red-collared Myzomela. We could hear cuckoo-doves and Mountain Kingfisher in the distance but couldn't get eyes on them. White-shouldered Fairywrens were a highlight with 2 males and a female popping up for very nice views.

We headed a little further up the hill, and into an area heavily planted with fruiting trees and orchids. The birds remained quiet, and Craig spotted Stephanie's Astrapia near a fruiting tree. Joseph pointed out the bird's nest, but despite our waiting it didn't come to the nest. Elisabeth may have been the only one to get onto a Great Cuckoo-dove, but we all saw the Red-capped Flowerpecker, and several jewel spiders, and had varying views of the Black-mantled Goshawk that flew overhead at speed. Just before lunch we had a Brahminy Kite fly over the lodge.

After a short break we headed into the forest, and it remained very quiet, but we pushed through and the birds came in, some better than others. Black Fantail, Buff-faced Scrubwren, and Glossy Swiftlets were seen well, while the Fan-tailed Monarch was seen as a flash by most viewers multiple times. Lorikeets screeched at extreme speed overhead, Friendly Fantails weren't so friendly, and the Rufous-naped Bellbird pretty much evaded us all. We had our first experience of the slow uphill in preparation for the walk to the top of the hill in a few days.

After dinner a few brave souls continued on and we hunted down the Papuan Boobook. We were fortunate it had decided to be only 50m from the lodge entrance and very easy to find, whereas the night before it had been in an inaccessible location.

## **Fri., Jun. 28                      Rondon Ridge**

We let the sun rise before meeting today, though it was still early as we made our way back up to the garden in search of birds of paradise. The first hour was relatively quiet but unlike yesterday the birds were calling on what was a beautiful clear-skied morning! This didn't make them much easier to spot but we had more idea of where to look. Red-capped Flowerpeckers put on a great show, feeding on mistletoe in the sun, and buzzing over our heads. The Great Cuckooshrike which was missed by most people yesterday returned to the same tree to feed and we all got great looks as it sat for photos. It was Craig who again spotted the highlight of the morning, Princess Stephanie's Astrapia. It was close though horribly backlit, but we watched, and it worked its way from fruit to hunting for insects and then into an umbrella tree which it climbed to the top of for views in perfect light.

We went out for a cultural tour after breakfast, with plans to visit three villages. The first was about 2 hours' drive away and we spotted numerous Black Kites, Eurasian Tree Sparrows, and Pied Bush Chats along the way. The predatory birds were a highlight for the driving aspect of today; Black Kite, Swamp Harrier (both subspecies), Black-winged Kite, Brown Goshawk, and Brahminy Kite were seen along the way. Our first cultural

experience was with a village which sang songs about trying to establish relationships, showed us some traditional medicines, weapons, and how to start a fire with bamboo!

After lunch we headed to see the Mud Men! A display of how a tribe would scare off people from lands that were stolen was given, and I think everyone considered it to be something they wouldn't want to experience in real life. They villagers had a range of items for sale including a Raggiana Bird of Paradise and Greater Lophorina, which were interesting to see up close. Unfortunately, neither was alive.

The drive to and from our third and final village got us a few new birds including Sacred Kingfisher, Rainbow Bee-eater, and Greater Woodswallow, which was a lovely compensation for not being able to watch the presentation from the village due to a timing issue. It remained a beautiful sunny day and we got to see a lot of how the locals live on our drive, the local markets, fruit stands, betelnut, and we waved at people until our arms hurt. We arrived back at Rondon Ridge just before the rain, which helped to cool us down after a warm day.

**Sat., Jun. 29**

## **Rondon Ridge**

We departed before sunrise, making our way to our third province, Enga province. It was an early start so we could maximize our time at Kumul Lodge, a higher elevation lodge with a completely new range of birds. Upon arrival we had Large Scrubwrens, and in no time at all we were at the feeding tables with Brown Sicklebill, Belford's Melidectes, and Smoky Honeyeater sitting in front of us making the most of the pineapple and papaya put out for them. We watched the iridescence of the male Ribbon-tailed Astrapia glisten as it moved, and the 3 females hanging around were also stunningly beautiful with longer tails than the male. It was about this point that we lost Lita for the day – she had found her place!

After seeing a few more birds around the feeding tables, we explored the balconies and walkways with Mountain Mouse-warblers, Island Thrush, Brown-backed Whistler, White-shouldered Robin, and Rufous-naped Bellbirds all making appearances. Glossy Swiftlets zipped overhead, and we could see the gloss that had previously been undetectable when viewing them from below. We walked into the dense cloud forest along a single file trail, and watched Friendly Fantail, Papuan Scrubwren, and Grey-streaked Honeyeaters flitting through the mossy vegetation.

Lunch was a wonderful affair and just as we finished up, a male brown sicklebill appeared at the feeding tables. We all got great views of the bird feeding before a female arrived and his interests seem to change instantly! We headed out to explore the other side of the lodge and tried to find the Crested Satinbird. Really, we wanted to see the male, and Elisabeth was able to, whilst a few others had to settle with the female, who although lovely, isn't bright orange. Further down the trail we were able to briefly glimpse the small black blur that was the Lesser Melampitta. It moved unseen through the vegetation and circled us, being spotted only as it crossed a short clearing.

Finishing the afternoon back around the lodge we had spectacular views of both the black and red forms of Stella's Lorikeet. There were flurries of activity, with robins, honeyeaters, lorikeets, melidectes, Canary Flyrobin, berrypeckers, and swiftlets all seen in close proximity. A highlight for Ted was a Rufous-naped Bellbird, so knocking another family off his list of families to photograph.

**Sun., Jun. 30**

## **Rondon Ridge**

Leaving at sunrise, we started our way up. For some birds of paradise elevation is important, and this includes the Black Sicklebill and King of Saxony. The plan was to get up the hill as steadily as we could and bird at the top, but spotting birds and hearing them call made that plan go out the window fairly quickly. We got 13 species on the way up, including a glimpse of a Black Sicklebill, the call of which stopped us all in our tracks. We also saw Blue-capped Ibis, Ornate Melidectes, Mid-mountain and Fan-tailed Berrypecker, and a few we couldn't quite get eyes on in the climbing bamboo.

Upon arrival at the top, we immediately heard the King of Saxony nearby, a McGregor's Bowerbird raced past, a Black-chinned Honeyeater was foraging, and Yellow-billed Lorikeets flew in to feed. We sat, stood, and napped around a small clearing for the next 6 hours with a great diversity of birds coming and going. It didn't take long before we had good views of the King of Saxony waving its eyebrow streamers as it foraged through the high canopy. A Garnet Robin surprised us all popping up right next to us, and was a bright jewel we all enjoyed; more lorikeets, including Yellow-billed and Stella's, went by, and a Plum-faced Parakeet fed up high. The friendliest of Friendly Fantails arrived at lunch and stayed for maybe an hour foraging on small gnats that had been a slight hindrance through the morning. The King of Saxony came and went, Brown Sicklebills called behind us, and we checked every Glossy Swiftlet in search of Mountain Swiftlet without luck.

Ominous clouds made us feel it was time to leave and we began down the hill, spotting a few birds on the way and making it down in an hour less time that it took to get up. The phantom monarch or Fan-tailed Monarch made a brief appearance where it had in the days before but remained somewhat of a black blur, and BVR (better view required). Fortunately, it didn't rain which gave us a little time to search the lower grasslands and check in on those who had remained around the lodge for the day.

**Mon., Jul. 1**

## **Rondon Ridge to Karawari**

With a slight sleep in this morning, we packed our bags as lightly as possible for our flight to the Sepik region, and the Karawari River. After a short bus ride and delay due to refuelling we were up in the air and headed to the lowlands. A magical flight over large uninhabited areas of forest was an experience, and the 10-degree change in temperature as we dropped over the range was certainly felt. The long, grass runway in the forest is an experience to land on. From here it was onto the boat and upriver to the lodge. A few birds, including Grey-headed Goshawk, Black Kite, Whistling Kite, and Brahminy Kite, were spotted on the way.

We were all feeling the heat, and our chariot, an old Toyota of questionable age and condition, drove us to the top of the hill, where cold towels were a refreshing break from the heat. Lunch and then a nap was had by most before our afternoon session.

Heading back in the Toyota we went down the hill and headed up the Karawari River. There was a lot to be seen, including a diversity of parrots. Dusky Lory, Coconut Lorikeet, Red-cheeked Parrot, Sulphur-crested Cockatoo, Palm Cockatoo, Edward's Fig-parrot, and Eclectus Parrot made for a nice introduction to the lowlands. Blyth's Hornbill was a lovely bird to watch fly by. As the afternoon cooled down, the parrots searched for their last meals before finding a place to roost. We watched a number of bird species in a large fruiting tree, with great views of cuckooshrikes, mynas, parrots, and imperial pigeons.

**Tues., Jul. 2**

## **Karawari**

We were travelling down river just as the sun was coming over the rainforest, and whilst trying to quietly enter a local village without waking the locals we were greeted by a small pack of dogs that made sure everyone knew we were there. We walked by the local houses and out the back to watch a tall upright branch protruding from the top of the forest. We could hear the male Twelve-wired Bird of Paradise but couldn't see it. In no time at all the female appeared on the display post, and soon was gone. The male continued to call for half an hour but didn't come to the post, so we headed to the airport, the first time most people had birded from a runway. There was a diversity of species to see: Boyer's Cuckooshrikes, Eclectus Parrots, Meyers Friarbird, and Orange-bellied Fruit-doves looking very cute with their tiny heads and fat orange bellies. There were fly-bys from Blyth's Hornbills, Sulphur-crested cockatoos, Singing Starlings, and Red-cheeked Parrots.

We continued downstream in search of large, tasty pigeons; however, they weren't to be found. Despite a few float-bys of a frequented area, the Victoria Crowned Pigeon wasn't seen. Blue-tailed Bee-eaters, Rainbow Bee-eaters, Great-billed Herons, and a number of the usual suspects kept us entertained until lunch.

The afternoon saw us upriver in a smaller tributary of the Karawari River. Going past the largest village in the area we waved and waved at all the children who waved, yelled and jumped in the water as we went by. The smaller waterway provided some needed shade given the heat, and we cruised along, ending up under a large fruiting tree full of Edward's Fig-parrots. We watched as they flitted between fruits as the sun began to fade.

**Wed., Jul. 3**

## **Karawari**

This morning the sun hadn't started to come up and we left in complete darkness. Hedging our bets, we went to the runway where we could see both display posts of the Twelve-wired Bird of Paradise. Within minutes we had the male sitting up on the post we couldn't see yesterday. The sun had yet to come up yet, so the bird didn't appear brightly coloured, but as the sun came up, we could see the vibrant yellow, and the wiry plumes the bird is famous for. A female was hanging around but gave little indication of interest sitting, distantly and only briefly coming near to the display post. The male put on a brief show, but there was still little interest from the female. Hornbills, cuckooshrikes, imperial pigeons, coucals, friarbirds, starlings, and parrots flew by in the 45 minutes we watched the Twelve-wired, which made for a great start to the day.

We continued downstream and stopped in at a fishing camp and had another 45 minutes of solid activity. One of the first birds was the rarely encountered Long-billed Cuckoo – so rarely encountered Chris (our guide) had never seen one in 10 years of birding and 15 years of living in the area! There were Shining Bronze-cuckoo, Little Bronze-cuckoo, Edwards Fig-parrot, Double-eyed Fig-parrot, Eclectus Parrot, Rufous-bellied Kookaburra, Collared Imperial Pigeon, Orange-bellied Fruit-dove, Zoe's Imperial Pigeon, And Black-capped Lory, which made for great birding as there was so much about. Glossy-mantled Manucode called but remained elusive.

After our mid-day siestas, we headed upriver and Chris spotted a Papuan Frogmouth hiding in the middle of a large tree as we went past on the boat. It was ridiculous that he spotted it. We stopped and looked, and it took the group about 20 minutes to all find it. The camouflage was incredible! We continued up a tributary and had good looks at Sacred Kingfishers and Shining Flycatchers, while enjoying the serenity of floating without the engine. We listened for the King Bird of Paradise but despite being an all-day bird (calls all day) it seemed to have clocked off for the afternoon, so we'd have to try tomorrow.

**Thurs., Jul. 4**

## **Karawari**

Continuing with the last bird of yesterday, we headed upriver to try for King Bird of Paradise. Venturing into the forest we were met with a considerable number of mosquitoes, our first real encounter for the trip. There was a beautiful dawn chorus, and we saw Common Cicadabird and Northern Fantail which were new birds for the trip, and a few people spotted Wompoo Fruit-dove. There were three King Bird of Paradise calling in the area but despite our searching we couldn't spot one. Chris vanished into the forest on occasion, and despite some coming near to us we sadly couldn't get eyes on them. We made our donations to the mosquitoes and continued to another site.

Heading up the tributary we had visited earlier, we listened for but couldn't hear any King Bird of Paradise so we raced further up to the lakes above the tributary. Yet again Craig spotted a bird in an incredibly difficult place to see, particularly at speed. So, we turned around, and he had found a Papuan Frogmouth perched. It was much easier to see than the day before, so everyone was able to see it clearly and get some photos.

The lake was open and exposed; the previous wet season had clearly impacted the area with a lot less vegetation than was present in previous years. Though water levels were low, and we couldn't explore too far, we had a good drive around seeing many Great Egrets, a few Little Egrets in breeding plumage with pink legs and blue facial skin, and a flock of Whiskered Terns that foraged on small invertebrates. Greg was happy to pick up a Willie Wagtail after 2 days of not having seen one, though I don't think anyone else was all that excited!

Avoiding the heat of the day we headed back for our last crack at King Bird of Paradise. Upon arrival we watched as a very young girl scaled fish in the river, she probably wasn't old enough by our standards to be given a knife, but she expertly scaled a large number of fish. We ventured back into the mosquito-filled forest and heard the King calling, but it didn't make itself seen. The forest was quiet but large numbers of lorikeets, cockatoos, and orioles called from overhead, many looking for places to roost. Coming out of the forest, we were greeted with a very large black cloud that was rolling our way. We hightailed it back to the lodge and were able to get back just in time to get onto the balcony and watch the clouds roll past, dumping a large amount of rain.

**Fri., Jul. 5**

## **Karawari to Rondon Ridge**

With clear skies, we headed for a walk around the lodge. A short walking track through the forest was perfect for the time we had left. The first few who got to the top of the hill had great looks at the Palm Cockatoo which had been calling throughout the early morning. We watched and listened and a Mimic Honeyeater or three were foraging in low vegetation and gave great views. Moving into the forest things were quiet but we moved through looking at the vegetation up close, hearing pitohui, honeyeaters, and lorikeets.

It was time to once again to visit the grass runway and Karawari international terminal, before flying back to Mount Hagen. Joseph (driver not bird guide) picked us up and we headed back up the hill into what was very refreshing air after the stifling heat of the lowlands. After a very late lunch we walked back to the viewing area above the lodge. Dark clouds rolled over so we didn't move too far but enjoyed watching a pair of Ornate Melidectes foraging and chasing New Guinea White-eyes.

**Sat., Jul. 6**

## **Rondon Ridge**

Having done extremely well with picking up most of our targets, our final morning back at Rondon Ridge was spent exploring down in the valley, in a cultural area of Polga. Near where we had visited the Mudmen we searched for the national bird of Papua New Guinea, the Raggiana Bird of Paradise. A male was quickly and

briefly spotted, and a female Greater Lophorina shared the same tree. We searched and searched, and with everyone catching a glimpse the bird was gone. Other species, including Glossy Swiftlet, Mimic Honeyeater, Brown Goshawk, Black-headed Whistler, and Brush Cuckoo, were present but not what we were chasing. Ken, our driver, heard there was a small hut down the road where a local man spoke to the Raggiana Bird of Paradise, so we went to visit. He was kind and accommodating, letting us in to search for the bird, whilst he called to it. It came and went briefly, but we all got to see the yellowish head and flashes of orange as it flew in and out.

Heading home, we stopped on the road for some roadside birding and had a number of birds very quickly: Yellow-breasted Bowerbird, Black-headed Whistler, Long-tailed Shrike, Elfin Myzomela, but most importantly after having heard them almost daily, we finally got to see a Brush Cuckoo!

Back at the lodge we spent the last afternoon hiking around the hillside in search of McGregor's bowerbird and the bower. We moved quickly through the forest, taking breaks at the strategically positioned seats that dotted the trail. We saw a small bower without any construction in the orchid garden, but at the highest point of the walk we found a bower under construction. The racetrack was complete, and moss lined, with a small maypole with sticks being in the process of being built. The owner called nearby and whilst we could hear it, we didn't get to see it. Other small scrubwrens and fantails jumped through the canopy, but we at least got to see the bower.

**Sun., Jul. 7**

## **Rondon Ridge to Cairns**

We packed and left Rondon Ridge early, getting to the airport 2 hours before departure. We finished checking in 10 minutes after our departure time... but we were all on the flight! Our bags were not. Arriving at Port Moresby we were 3 bags short, but fortunately the bags arrived about 2 hours later and Judy and Elisabeth battled airport security to get them back! With bag in tow, we checked in and dropped them off in the hope we would see them in Cairns. Probably Australia's shortest international flight, we were landing within 1.5 hours and so were all our bags. Our last day was unfortunately more stressful than desired, but we were back where we started, with plenty of birds under our belts!