



Papua New Guinea

August 4-19, 2011

Peg Abbott, Jun Matsui of Sicklebill Safaris, local guides, and five adventurous participants

The flight from Brisbane to Port Moresby took just three hours but -- like leaving the USA for parts of Mexico, in that three hours the world turns away from prosperity. Our flight had lots of empty seats, only 109 of

us on a 767 jet, so several of us moved into window seats to gaze below at the brilliant ribbon of sand beach that extends north into mangroves along the Australian coastline. Seeing the Great Barrier Reef from the air was marvelous -- iridescent islands held rings of turquoise, cerulean, and jade clustered together like puzzle pieces sorted and ready for assembly. We then passed over open ocean of the Torres Strait, over a series of small islands, some with dramatic topography, and then to the colors of reef fringing PNG.

Mainland PNG itself looked dry, like something of Africa with many small fires burning on sparse agricultural plots



or, closer to the city, burning trash. Most land seemed open, unsettled. Closer to Port Moresby, PNG's capital city, industrial and shipping areas marked the outskirts of town. The airport was small and amazingly quiet, no crowds standing to meet people, no lines of cab drivers or people trying to grab luggage to help us. We got Kinas at the ATM, paid 100 (about \$50USD) of them each to enter the country, and met our local contact, Daniel, and our guide from Sicklebill Safaris for the journey, Jun Matsui, with ease. In a nice little air-conditioned mini-bus, we were on our way.

We checked into the Hideaway Hotel, which was close by, and, as promised, a safe, clean but not lush hotel. Prices in Port Moresby were out of control, with the Holiday Inn charging \$800 Kina per night for a standard room, so several tour groups had opted for the Gateway or Hideaway this year. The lobby was inviting as were flowering trees, one which held colorful Yellow-faced Mynas, our first bird of the trip in PNG. The property was

guarded, and rimmed by a metal fence painted green to match the garden and concrete walls. A line-up of smiling women greeted us at the desk; a porter helped with the bags. Jean's and my room was maybe a desktop wider than a cruise ship quarters, with two twin beds, a lamp (but no plug), one closet and one desk. Jean's bed broke in pieces when she put her suitcase down on it, the wooden slats making loud sounds as they hit the tile floor. Soon we had three people added to our small space, one to fix the bed and two to supervise, smile for our camera, and promise it would be ready when we returned. We left one standing bed and piles of our stuff -- already seeming ridiculously too much in this county of so little -- and went off for a city tour.

"Cultural" Daniel (we had another Daniel as our birding guide upon our return) was small in stature but big in spirit, and his gentle voice and information gave life to the city. The museum proved to be closed (a blackout

inside was the reason given, but it was also closed upon our return) and though the Parliament building was just closing, an eloquent and delightful young man, dressed in a smart jacket and tie, allowed us in for a tour.

The building was impressive, with an intricate mural and expansive reflection pool outside and fabulous Sepik paintings placed on high ceilings of the inside. The building was a gift from Australia, the architect from New Zealand. The shape of it has four very different corners honoring four cultural regions of the country. The effect of the place is spacious with the ceiling height of the lobby standing open for three stories. The chamber, on the second floor, is more intimate, yet has seating for the 109 members and a gallery of some 400. Our guide showed us where Hilary Clinton had stood to address the people, and showed us gifts to the country, proudly displayed, from China and England. PNG had just had elections as former Prime Minister Michael Somare is seriously ill in Singapore. There was some question as to the legitimacy of these elections, and this story would dominate the news during our stay. Large photos of other Prime Ministers, all men to date, showed us the faces of those in power for five-year terms since independence in 1976. We were amazed to find the prominent display of the lobby to be an insect collection, proudly displayed, of beetles, walking sticks, and butterflies (PNG has the largest butterfly species in the world). Entomologist friends, be proud!!

From Parliament we drove through the city, taking in a view of the harbor and its mix of new and old, rich and poor as we crossed from the suburbs, over a pass and down into the old administrative center. We visited the section of stilt houses, shacks built over the water by the government as they relocated a village to create the city. The area appears in books and post cards as quaint, but its poverty is shocking. Today was a sunlit day, so laundry was out in profusion; the tide was out, so a thick black mud oozed between stilts and huts halfway out the length of the walkway. Daniel and our driver spotted a friend who would guide us out (entry by invitation only). Our walk carried the motion of a game of billiards -- seen eye-level of the table, with children bouncing every direction like colorful balls. We have never seen so many children! Their young vibrant voices rang out everywhere. They did seem filled with joy, playing kick-the-can with small, ragged-edge metal food cans they'd pile up, and explode with kicks of bare feet, then reassemble to try again. Tiny children walked the unrailed boardwalk with ease, one we had to carefully navigate between missing boards, weak boards, laundry, pigs and kids. The woman taking us through smiled to all; kids posed for photos; and we'd show them the results on the screen of our cameras. Pigs grunted in small slat sties also on stilts, one woman had potted flowers just ready to bloom. Several of the homes had fabric over windows, some privacy amid the mass of over a hundred homes in close proximity. A few had painted window frames, kids stood in open doorways. We took it all in, vibrant, busy, life on the edge, all in view of the growing modern city.

From here we moved on to drive through downtown, with its few large buildings and handful of elegant hotels, two large banks, and then along the coast dotted with shipping piers, and up a hill to a viewpoint of the city. Here, more scores of children gathered around us to stare, say hello, as we gazed off at islands rimming the horizon and a city pouring over to two sides of this peninsula of the Coral Sea.

Home to dinner, which seemed to take forever, and sleep. Peg and Bud wandered over to chat with the men guarding the gate, asking about the elections, their thoughts on if they were valid and what would happen. We discussed economics, politics, and one smiled and said with some sadness, "It's very hard to bring this country UP." Already we'd grown fond of the people and place, and fervently hope someone can find a way to do so.

Aug. 5 Day of Travel to Kiunga / KM 17 Greater Bird of Paradise Lek

Today turned into a day of travel: a possible short direct flight had a segment added on to Daru on mangrove-lined southern coast of PNG, so we did not arrive in Kiunga until mid-afternoon. Daru sits at the mouth of the Fly River, and Kiunga was the farthest navigable port along this river several hundred miles away. The

landscape was reminiscent of the Amazon, with meanders of a great river and unbroken forest all around. We were excited to see an Australasian Pratincole next to the runway in Daru, along with several Gull-billed Terns. Little else was there, a mission school and church, an orderly village, fishing vessels, and surf.

On arrival in Kiunga, we were itching to get out and discover a few of PNG's amazing birds, so the suggestion of Samuel Kepkunai, our local operator, to drop our things quickly at the hotel and continue out to KM 17 to see if we could catch sightings of Greater Birds of Paradise on their display trees sounded good. This was the site where David Attenborough was hoisted up the tree to wait, ensconced in a blind, to film the memorable footage we'd all watched in his PBS Nature series film *Birds of the Gods*.

To deposit our gear, we pulled into a small guest lodge, one that remains hidden behind a busy hardware store on the main street of town. There is also a small grocery/general store next to the hotel office, and at each location, scores of people sat or stood watching others going in and out of the store, or people doing anything at all to catch their interest. We certainly caught their interest, unloading from, then returning to the bus with optics draped over our arms, decked out in mud boots and field clothing. We smiled and said many hellos, coming and going from the quiet little oasis inside the gate.

Just off the bus we had our first encounter with things characteristic of PNG as we stepped over fresh wads of betel nut spit, its magenta hue soon to be a familiar site on sidewalks and on the toothy smiles of young and old, men and women alike. Betel nuts, the seeds of tropical Areca palms, were for sale everywhere. The green betel nuts (buai) are the shape and size of limes, in the cities and small town markets people sit side by side on small tarps to sell them, each with a pile for sale that with luck may disappear by late in the day. It was by far the most common market item we saw throughout Kiunga and throughout PNG.

A half-hour later, stepping into the forest on a well-constructed trail, we found ourselves walking into another realm. The bird sounds were divine! Our first sighting was a noisy Red-cheeked Parrot we got in view in the scope. Within the forest, rich chords became agitated then soothed again, reverberating through a wall of green leaves -- Greater Birds of Paradise! However, seeing these wondrous creatures proved more elusive than hearing them. Seven of us and several local guides were stumped, searching for over a half-hour, with sound all around us. Finally there was a signal to come to the scope and voila, there were two, then three males in all their glory. Long yellow plumes, fanning wings, odd shaped heads and bills -- what a start to our birding. We topped that off with more views of Red-cheeked Parrots, and a haunting call of the Hook-billed Kingfisher that would not come out of dense forest. We then returned to our hotel for dinner - roasted chicken and vegetables - before turning in for the night. Fair warning to all who read this, they are serious about red wine being rare in PNG - little could we imagine we'd willingly pay 100 Kina (about \$50USD) for Yellowtail Shiraz, but after our day - we did. At several places there simply was no wine at all, including the larger Cloudlands Hotel in Tabubil. (Hint - there is a great wine store in downtown Port Moresby to stock up for your trip, in the same plaza as Asia Aroma restaurant. Great selection of Australia wines at a much better cost, or catch some while going through duty free...)

Aug. 6 On the Fly / Kwatu Camp / Elevela River

We left early this morning to start our journey by boat



up the Fly River close to dawn, and our first lesson of the day was just how sincere they were in listing the need for rubber boots on this journey. The Fly River was quite low, and it was amply lined with thick gumbo mud, which we sank into almost to our boot tops. No wonder few PNG natives on the river wear shoes. We noticed right away that the locals have amazing foot musculature and we soon envied these thick, agile, powerful feet.

What a great group we had. We all took it in stride, laughing and offering to share boots to board our boat, the commotion we made provided entertainment to many locals. Soon we were zipping upstream, that is, until the motor knocked, then knocked again. Now the crew took this in stride, mid-river getting on their cell phones. With luck, Samuel's daughter was in range. Mid-river we changed boats - another acrobatic feat for us that caused a few smiles to emerge from our crew. Our hosts are so agile, so at home in this world, there is little we can do to hide our stilted, foreign ways...

Everywhere we'd been in-country we were well-received, and along the river we got nothing but smiles. We watched people fishing, watched them gather outside their homes to watch us passing. Everywhere there were children. Children are as much at home in boats as fish in the sea; toddlers practice steps between two parents in dugout canoes. People-watching was fascinating, but we also had lots of great birds to see en route. On the wide expanse of the Fly, we saw many of the larger species, White-bellied Sea Eagles, Brahminy Kites, Dollarbirds, Blyth's Hornbills, flocks of Eclectus Parrots, smaller Orange-bellied Fig Parrots. We started picking up an array of pigeons, trying to get color in glimpses of various individuals we could classify as Fruit Doves, Collared Imperial Pigeons, or Papuan Mountain Pigeons. Kwiwan Sibiu was our expert guide, and we gained immense respect for his talent and good humor throughout the Kiunga / Tabubil portion of our stay.

Turning up the smaller Elevala River, we had some fantastic sightings, perhaps the most memorable of the day were repeated views of two Black Bitterns. After birding for several hours by boat, we arrived in camp, stopping first at a small village to pick up Paul, our camp chef. He came down the steep hill accompanied by two dozen boys, little ones naked, older ones clothed but barefoot, scampering through the mud with ease. The women and girls stayed on the hill, watching and waving in response to our salutations. He carried a massive knife and an equally large fish, but this must have been staff food as we had only sandwiches set out for us on the upstairs porch of our lodge for lunch.

Having had the place described as one step above camping to us, we were delighted to find this a most comfortable lodge, one made of native materials, perched up on stilts above an open yard. There was a fine view of the river and several prominent trees in the eating area, and six rooms with twin double beds, complete with mosquito netting provided comfort. The rooms are small, with thin bamboo walls, but they felt cozy and provided us a home in some of the best lowland forest on the planet. We also had to cross the lawn to our bush toilet (outhouse), the showers were bucket-only, but in all, to be with these fine birds, away from the masses of people we'd encountered in town, worked well for us and we would have enjoyed even more time there for the birding.

From the lodge we saw our first manicodes, Trumpet and Crinkle-throated, and got scope views of both of them along with views of Golden Cuckoo Shrikes. Fruit Doves also enjoying exposed perches included three species seen: Ornate, Orange-bellied and Pink-spotted, and another, Wompoo, heard. We spent a full afternoon walking trails, working our way slowly back into the forest, which changed in character as we climbed even 20 ft. or so in elevation. We heard Hooded Pittas at ground level, while at canopy level a small flock came in and with it was a prize - Wallace's Fairy Wrens, which put on a good show for all. They traveled with two species of small gerygones, Green-backed and Yellow-bellied.

After the buzz of a flock our work began, but with patience Kwiwan was able to call in a Blue Jewel Babbler, one of the real gems of PNG and a species very hard to see. The intensity of its color is astonishing. Thanks to showing up

near a blind assembled for viewing a Flame Bowerbird's bower, we were able to stack in the small structure and stay hidden, allowing us to watch the babbler for several moments as it approached, called, and cocked its tail.



The blind would comfortably hold a photographer and gear; we stuffed in seven of us plus guides for some intimate viewing.

Travel weariness hurt our final bird list here. Kwiwan hoped we could stay until dark to glimpse Vulturine Parrots coming in to roost, but that was an hour away and we were still jet-lagged from the cross-the-sea voyage. So, after the babbler, we returned to our lodgings in time to enjoy sunset, and content ourselves with sightings from the porch of birds flying in to roost. We had been warned that dinner would be sparse - foods available in small Kiunga grocery, tinned beef and tinned fish,

with rice, peas and bread. Jean brought out her stash of sweets to help us end a very good day. Most of the group were too sacked out to go out again for night birds - Jun and Kwiwan did go, and they found a small possum, and heard two species of owlet-nightjars. From the lodge we all heard Papuan Frogmouths.

Aug. 7 A Wondrous Morning w/ Paradise Kingfishers & Crowned Pigeons / Return on the Fly / Kiunga

A good night's rest was very refreshing, and we needed it as Kwiwan had adventures planned for us! Our first was marvelous, we descended a trail down from the lodge to the river's edge, for front-row seats for a 12-wire Bird of Paradise male, displaying loudly from a tree-snap perch. We watched him with scope views and aimed our cameras, a bit far for David Attenborough type-shots but close enough for creating memorable images. We then hopped in the boat; hopped being an exaggeration as we first had to navigate some very wide wooden "stairs" that fell shy of the boat landing by about 10 feet. This was ten feet of thick mud, made passable by a maze of boards that had sunk in just enough to be sporting.

Once aboard we had fantastic luck with birds - Great-billed Herons, Ornate and Pink-spotted Fruit Doves, Rufous-bellied Kookaburras, for some the tiny Azure Kingfisher, and then -- a sighting that made the trip for many of us - an inquisitive pair of Southern Crowned Pigeons. This was a first look at this spectacular species for all members of our group. This is a bird that the field guide cannot prepare one for - its rich subtle hues of color, odd form and expressive crown. Kwiwan caught a view of them from our moving boat just as they emerged from a dark area of the forest. In this lighting, their blue heads seemed iridescent, with plumes on their heads rising and falling as they moved into a more open area. This duo coordinated movements between each other with constant communication expressed by alertness and relaxation of crown feathers. These pigeons are robust, wary, and very special.

Birding from the boats was done with relative ease, but less we get too soft, we were soon back to the mud, out for a real slog up an embankment and onto forest pathways. It proved to be well worth it as we had marvelous views of three spectacular species of paradise-kingfishers: Little, Common and Buff-breasted, and fairly decent scope views of the King Bird of Paradise - one of Attenborough's film stars. For us, he was a vocal red blob in the high canopy, but with some help with the scope and maneuvers rivaling yoga poses to get there, we scored. Along the trail we admired myriad palms and plants of the forest and spotted a dugout canoe half-finished and left behind, a lot of work to leave behind - likely some weakness in the structure. Bud found a flashy green and black

cicada; we all found some outrageous fruits and flowers littering the floor from wind passing through the canopy. While the sightings were great, photography was tough, with dark light and few birds in close.

We continued on the walk until 1PM, and then returned for lunch, a rest and the three-hour trip by boat back down the Fly. Having seen so much we relaxed, chatted, waved to kids, some quite shy, enough that Jean and Gingy joked about needing to learn skills to be a grandmother "on the Fly". We spotted a brightly painted water taxi and watched with intrepidation as black-bellied clouds gathered. A Pied Cormorant and a Whistling Kite flying up from the beach were new to our list. Also new was the take-out place, as the river had dropped so much we could not get into the place we'd left from. Instead, we navigated into a small stilt-house village where a kind local woman came down to help us find the easiest path. There simply was no easy way out, and we proved once again



to be good entertainment as we picked our way up various levels of mud-banks, in and out of the houses, out across a wide plain where, in full view of many, Elaine took a header, her slippery rubber boots giving way. She came up with a big smile, so much a part of her character, and absolutely caked with mud. Our local woman reached out to help, and by the time we reached the bus, we all had just about joined her in adorning ourselves. A few beers were in order when back at the hotel, where a very nice meal of local Baramundi fish and a sense of home awaited us at Kiunga Lodge. Ice cream with caramel sauce for dessert - yum! In PNG such simple things emerge as wonders.

Aug. 8 Kiunga / Boystown Road / Tabibul

We woke early this morning to the first sound of rain on the trip, a steady flow of water came down in earnest as we left town, headed for Boystown Road to a viewpoint from which we had hopes of spotting Flame Bowerbirds in flight. The road had little to no traffic, and we found a raised spot we could set up stools and scopes. As rain turned to drizzle, we watched a grand bird show, with Gray-headed Goshawk, several manicodes, Red-cheeked Parrots, and various smaller birds all coming up to perch. We watched for flyovers, and Gingy called one out in time that we all looked almost straight up to see – BRIGHT orange under wings and body – the FLAME (Flame Bowerbird) passing right overhead, wow. Mission accomplished, we headed off to try for various species near the airport and wharf. Both excursions turned out to be slim for birds but bright with local color, and we enjoyed seeing people going about their daily life, many carrying colorful bags they call *bilums*. Bilums for people are like feathers for birds - a visual display for others to enjoy. We found them in infinite variety and soon began to accumulate a few for ourselves. Huge cargo ships seemed a surprise when we saw them parked at the port, a reminder that Kiunga was indeed tied to the outer world, being the most northern navigable port on the Fly.



The morning passed quickly, we returned to the lodge for lunch of homemade soup and spaghetti Bolognese, and then were on our way north to the mining town of Tabubil on the all-weather road, in a Toyota coaster. The larger bus was a relief in that we could spread out, open windows and sit on less savory seats than in the mini-van

we'd had thus far. Let's just say that odors collect rapidly in the tropical climates of PNG - and van seats were one of several reminders that this was an adventure and not a luxury outing.

The trip took about three hours plus stops, and we were lucky to have pretty good weather - after all, we were bound for one of the wettest places on Earth, the remote Star Mountains of western PNG, very close to the border with Irian Jaya. We passed one small village after another, waving at the myriad people walking to places unknown along the roadside, and then hit a long empty stretch with lush forest on either side. They see so few tourists that we took on the role of ambassadors, always greeting and smiling. Bud captured many of the scenes, leaning out the window. On a high ridge we walked an area where several weeks ago another group had with luck spotted a New Guinea Harpy Eagle. We had no such luck, but we found some other interesting species here and at our next stops: Rufous-bellied Kookaburras, Emperor Fairy Wrens, several Western Black-capped Lories and along the river, a Little Ringed Plover. Before reaching town we took a detour through a long, dark tunnel, emerging to the light at a place we'd return to in search of Salvadori's Teal. This day there had been a landslide and the place was busy with big equipment.

The town of Tabubil was as orderly in its layout as described in our Lonely Planet guide books, and en route to our hotel, we passed through a line of very decent-looking homes, complete with gardens and plantings, and by a hospital and busy mall-like market area. Everywhere was crowded with people, and around the orderly section we spotted little makeshift markets and much simpler housing for workers. We noted a bank, a Toyota dealer, a supermarket. This was a true mining company town, a modern day version of Tombstone or Bisbee, complete with a frontier mentality. Signs about safety all carried the Ok Tedi mine logo.



The Cloudlands hotel was near a recreation area consisting of tennis and squash courts and a busy soccer field. Here, we were gated in but felt secure, finding our way to the courtyard bar, to tally up our growing bird list and have dinner. Peg talked to a businessman there for a few days on contract with the mine, learning a few of the



ropes of life in Tabubil. We watched CNN and BBC news on our televisions, learning of the USA stock market crash, riots in London, all which seemed very far away. Exciting here was news of over 100 police arriving as things had gone "tribal" in the last few days.

Aug. 9 Water Pipeline Road / Tabubil / Where do foodies go in PNG?

This morning we stopped at the local police to assess rumors of tribal activities, leaving them notice of our whereabouts as we headed on to greet resplendent nature. We walked through thick mist as we headed out for birding, but at least experienced no pouring rain. It had rained steadily all night, and we'd heard a group from the previous trip had waited six hours to do this same route, waiting for a gap in the near ever-present rain.

We walked up a steep gravel road, more of a road in concept rather than function, put in to service the town and mine's fresh water supply. We found several clearings to be good for viewing, finding Gray-headed and Golden Cuckoo-shrikes, Black-faced Monarchs, a female Magnificent Bird of Paradise, Black-billed Cuckoo Doves, and a very tame pair of Lemon-bellied Flycatchers. We walked uphill for some ways, finding White-eared Meliphagas, White-rumped Robins, Northern Fantails, White-bellied Thicket Fantails, and colorful Mountain Peltops. Papuan Flowerpeckers got voted as one of the cutest finds of the day, with their jaunty bright colors, found feeding alongside dapper White-shouldered Fairy Wrens. As we gathered to board the bus, admiring the webs of massive orb-weaver and social spiders, we all got looks at White-eared Bronze Cuckoos, a pair feeding above the road. The walk was steep, several tiers of steep terrain, and the substrate was tricky with gravel, but we persevered to find some good species. At the end of our walk, we had good looks at a perched Variable Goshawk. This area once was lush forest, but alongside the road people have access to clear land, and the forest edge pushes farther and farther uphill. Our best finds were right at this edge.



We then drove on, parking by an elevated bridge over a dramatic gorge. Below us we found River Flycatcher (reminiscent of the New World's Torrent Tyrannulet) and Torrent Larks, and above two fascinating raptors, a Brown Goshawk - perched - and a Little Eagle in flight. Jun and Gingy saw a Torrent Lark from the bridge but the others had continued walking across the bridge and met locals who showed them bats coming and going from rock perches at the water's edge. We got some great photos of scenery, people, and birds, and then loaded back into the van to go to lunch at the hotel. After a break, we returned to the Salvadori's Teal spot, claustrophobic Peg's thrill for the day as we got another round trip through the long dark tunnel. Salvadori's Teal sightings can be tough, and we scanned for some time before Kwiwan hollered - scope views - marvelous! We also had Common Sandpiper and Torrent Flycatcher, before an afternoon walk, on which we followed a road, downhill, looking at Rainbow Lorikeets and literally THOUSANDS of Dusky Lorikeets. The latter flew high above us as they passed to their roost spots, flying in squadrons of three hundred or so at a time. We stayed out until dusk, with hopes of viewing Pesquot's (Vulturine) Parrots but did not find them. We did see the Splendid Bird of Paradise, a female, the first of several individuals we would find on this journey.

After dinner at the Hotel, several of us gathered at the outside lounge, where Gingy showed us images of her and Bud's recent trip to Turkey, one of Naturalist Journey's featured destinations next spring. Our guides joined us, as did several of the hotel staff. It was one of those priceless vignettes of travel, seeing the faces of those from Tabubil as they stared at images and made soft comments about the buildings treasures of the ancient world.

August 10 Tabubil / Lunch at the Golf Course / Beer Can Hill

Due to locals getting "tribal" of late (some machete attacks between villagers) and some wild tales of gold hustling, security was quite tight at the mine, Samuel was not able to get permission for us to go to a new area he thought we would like for birding. Instead, we



returned to the steep gravel watershed road, walking uphill in the rain a bit discouraged. But the in time the clouds lifted, and we found - at a distance - some great birds - Carola's Parotia and the Magnificent Bird of Paradise - sharing a feed on a large flat stalk of flowering tree. They flew closer to another perch, and at one time we had multiple males in the scope - wow. We had looks at White-shouldered Fairy Wrens and Red-headed Flowerpeckers en route back down the hill.

Peg had read that the local golf course was the place to dine, and with some persuasion, we passed as "new residents" and were accepted for lunch at the club. As food at the Cloudlands Hotel could be best described as dismal, we were ready for relaxing food and fun. Fun it was, we felt giddy with the indulgence. This was a nice open-air dining room and they had Internet - providing relief for several after days with no contact back home. We had fresh barramundi, chips, and fresh brewed lattes to top it off, oh, after the red wine we indulged in as our hotel had none – thanks, Peg, for this find!

In the afternoon we searched again for Pesquot's Parrot, to no avail. We perched on a hill littered with beer cans, getting slaphappy as we took turns on our few stools, running slim on patience and wishing we had some beer while we waited! After all this time spent with Kwiwan, our talented local guide, we finally heard more of his story. He's led a fascinating life, beginning as a sailor, with marriage taming down to life as a guide, in partnership with Samuel, his cousin. He has led film crews from around the world to record the mating dances of various Birds of Paradise, including a six-month assignment with David Attenborough and the BBC in remote places around the nation. Talk to anyone in PNG, and you will find surprises. Close to the dusk, an Eclectus Parrot flew close by at eye-level, a nice reward for our efforts, but Pesquot's would remain elusive. Tonight's entertainment was ordering dinner at the Cloudlands Hotel, with items so deliciously described on the menu but far, far away from the larder at hand. They had pizza, so we had pizza, and it wasn't half bad. Throughout the trip, Brenda's affable and inquisitive nature got her into great conversations with the locals. Here she had won the confidence of the hotel's bartender, who somehow came up with Bombay Sapphire gin. Wow.

August 11 Dawn for Shovel-billed Kingfisher / Turn-around and Stay...

Several of us got up quite early this morning to go in search of the elusive Shovel-billed Kingfisher, active nocturnally and at first light. While we did have good looks at a Papuan Boobook that Kwiwan called up and Papuan Frogmouths flying near the area we heard the kingfisher, Mr. Shovel-billed, like his cousin the Hook-billed remained in dense cover, and despite moving around quite a bit, it never came into view.

The day unfolded from here. Room 24 of the Cloudlands Hotel was not where I wanted to be recording the day's trip report, but our flight from Tabubil to Hagan was cancelled due to a mechanical problem encountered on some leg of the plane's circuitous route through various PNG cities. We had sculpted the day around this flight, arriving at the airport very early to check and leave bags. We had dropped off the bags, then went to the local grocery, which for this part of the world is a supermarket (they call a hypermarket), one with aisles of paper goods, a butcher section, dairy section and rows and rows of coffee, cookies, chips,



cereals, tinned fish and meat. We were the only light-skinned people in the store, and as usual we had lots of friendly greetings, and literally hoards of staring kids stacking up around us.

We bought various meat pies and yoghurts and cookies for our lunch, taking them to the airport coffee shop to eat them, outside. Jun found a life bird for Kwiwan here; likely one overlooked previously - a pair of Tree Sparrows at the airport. We heard the news of our flight cancellation on the loudspeaker, and then Peg and Jun had a half-hour of haggling to try to solve our dilemma. No other flights this day, from either Tabubil or Kiunga. Back to the Cloudlands, we tried to be grateful for a clean roof overhead, as the cloudburst broke just as we passed through the gate.



As we were set with tickets to the Mt Hagan festival, we could take no chances for weather delays tomorrow, so on Samuel's advice, we elected to return to Kiunga the next day. As we'd returned to the hotel just in time for the heavens to open - torrents of rain spilled forth for the next hour, there was nothing to do but rest, read, and catch up on notes. The day deteriorated further when we met at 3PM to go out birding, ready to brave the now lighter drizzle, only to find our wiry driver had slid away like an eel, perhaps with his tip money. He was gone. Poor Kwiwan and Sam spent the afternoon looking for him, while the rest of us walked the residential area of

town, finding Sacred Kingfishers and Brahminy Kites, some colorful flowers in the yards. We then followed suit on what we'd observed locals do with time on their hands, and ordered beer, sat in the hotel courtyard, and spied a new honeyeater for a prize. The evening was rescued by our choice to return to the golf course for dinner, where we had a lot of fun and an excellent meal.

August 12 Return to Kiunga / Flight to Hagan / Birds of Paradise at the feeder

Eighty miles of rough gravel road, with the situation pretty tense with the unhappiness of the boss with our sweet but wayward driver made for an interesting morning. We made few stops, one at the driver's very simple hut home, not wanting to get caught behind one of the mining convoys. We arrived in Kiunga by 10AM; spent time at the airport arranging a new set of tickets (let me tell you what a crowded air ticket office smells like when stuffed with locals on a warm humid day...). That thankfully in order, we headed back to the Kiunga Guest House for soup and bread, more spaghetti Bolognese, and back in time to board the plane. Up, up and away - we were ready.



Nice views of forest and peaks were soon covered by clouds, and in an hour's time or so, we descended to Mt. Hagan. From the air it revealed itself as a rich agricultural area. Leaving the airport we had our first glimpse at life in the highlands where none of us were prepared for the hordes of people we would see. As the annual Mt. Hagan Show was in progress, there were scores more than normal, but indeed we'd find the highlands to be a mosaic of villages, closely spaced with people walking everywhere, many carrying heavy loads of lumber, sweet potatoes, or other items. There were numerous small markets, featuring a range of betel nuts to broccoli for sale. The largest

market near Mt. Hagan city itself was a sea of mud, with people sitting quite comfortably on small tarps they shared with their wares, as pigs ambled about. We captured photos through the windows and kept on going into the mountains. On arrival at Kumul Lodge, we were tired after our stress of plane delays and travel, so elected just to enjoy the porch and bird-viewing from it, with cup of coffee in hand. This turned out to be utterly fantastic, with great views of Smoky Honeyeaters, Brehm's Tiger Parrot, Brown Sicklebill, and stunning views of Ribbon-tailed Astrapia, both male and female - remarkable birds!

Birds of Paradise and parrots at the feeder filled the perfect order for this day! Rain came in by nightfall and as the temperature plummeted, we layered up with fleeces and met by the fire ahead of dinner - what a contrast to days



previous sweating our way down the Fly! For our hedonistic group, the news that the place had only SP beer was a small relief as we had heard it was dry, but our craving for wine increased as the temperatures fell, and as the German tourists sharing our stay pushed us out of the dinner line.

August 13 The Incredible Mt. Hagan Show

We are starting to get the rhythm of life in PNG. Our van left nowhere near the 7:30 am departure time, and our

group of 7 suddenly became a very full van of 13, departing at 8:30 am. There were tales of gas shortage and various events leading to this, but hey, in time we got to the festival, bumping down the pot-hole ridden pavement going to town. We were quite anxious, as our plane delay had precluded seeing the preparatory day preceding the show, a day most excellent for photography.

Today was to be a cultural feast as our tour was timed with the annual Mt. Hagan Show, or sing-sing, where with our bird-watching skills would be used searching out feathers on headpieces of various tribes in full regalia. Some thirty years ago, the festival was started to help build unity and stop warfare between villages in this nation



where rugged terrain has isolated people over time, resulting in over 700 languages and fierce rivalry. This is often the largest festival, though several others have sprung up in its wake. Costumes and headpieces are unique for each group. These are passed down through the generations, and on them some of PNG's rarest

creatures can be found. Our visit started out with another theme we'd grown to know in PNG - MUD (no warning

from our guide to prepare). Trying to get information could be testy at best for us on this trip, and now in hindsight, we wished we'd had donned our mud boots and brought our stools! The parking area was a slush heap of mud, with giant holes of water to wade through. But there was music, and costumes calling, life to carry on,



and with great anticipation, we crossed over to the preparation area, where people were preening like the best of the birds we'd seen. We spent about four hours here, and it was a kaleidoscope of color and rhythm, so memorable.

Numerous tribes were represented here, and special groups, such as the widows, women – young and old - who dress simply, covering their bodies with a chalk-like mud, dancing with somber faces as if lost in a rhythm we could not touch. There were men completely covered in moss and lichens, women wearing lovely drapes of bark cloth, grass and cloth skirts on men and women that raised and lowered as they danced to vibrant drums. There were chants, with a keen ear one could sort them out as different for each tribe - the sum total being hypnotic in effect. At

times a dance group would rush to the outer circle and perform, approaching us with spears, nostril decorations, beaks of hornbills and cassowaries draped around their necks, full Crowned Pigeons fanned out with various parrots and lorikeets facing head down, valued for their color. In a country with so little, these birds provide feathers as if gems. Only enlargement of our photos will



reveal all the wonders of decoration, from waist to headdress, what a display before our eyes. Gingy spoke her disappointment of not seeing the traditional penis gourds (later we'd find them hanging from a lamp at the Holiday Inn in Port Moresby), but considering just how uncomfortable they must be, we hedonists could not complain. There were reams of pendulous breasts, from young to old,

powdered or polished with red ochre, moving with the rhythm of the day.

We were amazingly free to wander about the whole affair! After several hours, and clouds clearing to let hot sun emerge, we were beat. We had lunch, perched seven people deep, on Peg's poncho under the shade of the Digicel Mobile Phone display tarp, a position that turned out to be front row seats as several bands groups to approach us face-on, vibrant with energy. One group presented itself so fiercely, we almost bolted! For a wildlife group the celebration was both fantastic and sobering. Some of the costumes, particularly headpieces, held fan-like sprays of New Guinea Harpy Eagle feathers. Others had the entire bodies of colorful Lorikeets displayed in similar fans of vibrant color. The deep red of King Bird of Paradise feathers were very common, being shorter they would be layered with other species. The fluid movements of long black tail feathers waving to the rhythm of dancing and chanting men held the spirits of hundreds, if not thousands of Stephanie's Astrapias. Mammals



were present too, the luscious hides of Tree Kangaroos and various species of marsupial Cuscus adorned chests and breasts, and upon them were layered strings of shells and other ornaments. Leaves became skirts, loin cloths and headpieces. It became clear that the people revered these creatures for their beauty. Today's conservation efforts must take these century old relationships into account, as the continued ability to procure such beauty may be their only key to several species survival. In time other products and colors may emerge to take some pressure off as well. Some strange

feathers are creeping in, peacocks likely imported from India, and plastic imitations of long, lovely King of Saxony Bird of Paradise plumes.



By 2PM they opened the gate to general admission, and the field became a sea of bodies, so we elected to head on home with hopes for some afternoon birding. The weather gods did not cooperate as we returned instead to a downpour, with temperatures dropping by the second. It was time for wine, and thank heavens for Max, who redeemed his lack of birding fervor for the day as he went off in search of this elixir for us. He brought back the most expensive box of *Rosso Dolce* any of us would ever have. We winced as our hoped-for red wine poured out pink, but it was wine, we'd

gotten warm by the fire, and dinner was really good - fish, beef and chicken, all with nice sauces, served with garden-fresh broccoli and carrots, yum. Our German cohorts were now quite friendly and we enjoyed dessert, which was fresh pineapple and papaya.

August 14 A Day at Odds with it all... / The Wabaq Festival

Had we known the plan for the day, we might have embraced it, but after a fabulous cultural day, we strongly wanted to turn towards birding. We had landed here a day late, had rain to discourage our first afternoon birding,

so our hopes were keen to bird in earnest. It was not to be, as most of the staff, including our birding guide, come from Enga province, Wabaq village, and they wanted to see their festival, today in its prime. Sort of like our 4th of July, with much more tradition. So we drove "an hour" to this show, birding on the way. Bud got into the spirit of things, being our front-seat ambassador by waving and saying the Tok Pisin (a universal PNG pigeon-English language spoken in PNG, much like Swahili in Africa) Good morning or Good afternoon. We all loudly chimed in "Happy Noon", not realizing it was "Avinun", not the first of our many language mishaps of the journey.



We had high hopes of combining birding with the festival, as this was the opposite direction to Mt. Hagan. We did make one roadside, and one viewpoint bird stop, where on the latter we picked up Splendid Bird of Paradise, Pied Chat, and Rainbow Bee-ater, but little else ahead came forth. The one hour stretched to 2.5, and finally we found parking, having driven through some impressive crowds. We stepped out of the bus into another quagmire of mud (this time with boots!), and once again geared up for what turned out to be a splendid cultural fest.

This show proved to be a good contrast, more authentic, intimate. Of the two, several of our group preferred this day. Two performing groups we had not seen at Mt. Hagan were here, notably the Tari, with their fierce-looking yellow faces contrasting ochre-polished bodies, cassowary beaks dangling from their backs. A couple of the dancers had feathers through their nose septum, turning and chanting they glared. Naomi, delightful daughter of the owners of Kumul Lodge, spent the day with us, and it made such a difference, learning the name and location of each tribe, with explanations of their dress, movements, and travel needed to get here to perform. She helped us shop for *bilums*, and we had fun with the locals, taking photos. This out-of-sorts day redeemed itself, and we left in time for some hopeful birding. Alas, just as we returned to lodge, we hit what seemed to be a daily afternoon rainout here higher in the mountains. Brenda, Peg, and Jun persevered and found Papuan Lorikeets on trails by the lodge. We met ahead of dinner by the fire, with our precious box of marginal wine, enjoying comparing notes with other guests on the day. Dinner was a full repeat of the night before with the same delicious ginger, celery, garlic, and chili-spiced soup preceding. It would be repeated for all nights of our stay.



August 15 Birding from Kumul Lodge

Today was worlds different than yesterday. We got the message through to Max that we wanted to bird, and he did a super job finding us a number of species. We left at dawn, on time, and ventured out to a trail into the hills in search of Blue Bird of Paradise. This is a larger bird than we'd envisioned, and when Elaine caught site of a male with his plumes atop a ridgeline snag, we were all elated.

Scenic views from this perch were divine, ridgeline after ridgeline with mist in between. New Guinea huts today look just the same as

those seen in our grade school geography books, but here there are smells and sounds and life. With the average lifespan here lingering at 50, it was sobering to realize our entire group was above average. Many were as curious of us as we were of them. How often do you see someone out walking their pig? Even on a mountain ridge line trail we attracted locals, always friendly, always hellos, always people standing around as we viewed through binoculars and scopes. We had a feast of birds here in what felt like a small hidden glade, Tit Berrypeckers, King of Saxony Birds of Paradise, Crested Berrypeckers, and Blue-capped If Rita, a taxonomic enigma. Coming down the trail, we found Papuan Scrub Wrens, Regent Whistlers, and other species.

We then drove on, finding a great spot for Ornate Honeyeaters, Island Leaf Warblers and Red-collared Myzomelas. The morning passed quickly, and we all felt so happy to have a real birding day, with great success on finding a lot of species.

We had lunch, after which several of the group gathered to write up trip notes on the porch, in view of the lodge feeders. This proved to be a very wise decision, as Gingy spotted, creeping out of the brush, a Chestnut Forest Rail, a spotted wonder that pecked through leaves and grass in plain view, much to our wonderment. A loud squawk signaled the arrival of a male Ribbon-tailed Astrapius that preened and posed and thrilled us. Several new members of the feeder list came in, including Archibold's Bowerbird, McGregor's Bowerbird, and Regent Whistler. Max came back to fetch us at 3 PM for a walk to see Crested Satinbird (Bird of Paradise), which we did with great success at a fruiting tree. The grand finale of the day was a bust, another hour-long wait for a species that did not come, this time a male King of Saxony BOP. But hey, we tried, we had good views of mountains, the coming and going of villagers, an endemic, and we got back in time for a last glass of our terrible box wine that seemed a real treat as temperatures fell and we crouched by the fire.

Dinner was exactly the same as it had been for the last three nights, so it lost a bit of its luster. We did enjoy the ginger soup, and this night another birding group joined us. A woman on the trip celebrated her birthday, and with their offer to share cake we jumped in like vultures, never pass up a treat in PNG is the message! We fantasized about dark chocolate, flan, and message to all - bring TREATS to PNG.

August 16 Mt Hagan to Port Moresby / Dining and Shopping for Respite

This morning was colored by angst, mainly for poor Jun who had a challenge trying to secure a bus for our passage to the airport. Vehicles are still pretty rare in PNG, and the lodge may have had few alternatives. Unable to help, the rest of us savored just a few more moments with Brown Sicklebills, Ribbon-tailed Astrapias, Brehm's Tiger Parrots, and the numerous and vocal Belford's Meledictes. We had good looks at Rufous Whistlers, White-winged Robins, and a quick glimpse of a new species - Mountain Mouse Warbler. Naomi, our guardian angel during the stay at Kumul Lodge, came to fetch us, a van had appeared, and into it we stuffed our bodies, adding in one of the workers with a child and all our luggage.

Brenda commented on how low we were slung, but it was wheels, and needing to be airborne for Port Moresby, off we went. We descended through villages, markets, pigs, lumber markets, AIDS signs, and crowds, reaching the airport as it opened at 9 AM. Peg and Gingy watched the gear as others went shopping, picking up some great *bilums*, both natural bark and modern wool, plentiful in design. The plane was on time, a modern wonder compared to our other two flights; back to the big city we were bound.

Port Moresby seemed like a calmer place, after the population push of the highlands. We had grown used to crowds gathering around us each time we got out of the bus, content to just watch us as we looked for birds. Here we were a slight but less intense curiosity. We dropped gear at the hotel, and then headed in for a restaurant Peg had researched ahead of the visit, Asian Aromas. What a find! Foodies we are, and a ten-day stretch of marginal fare had taken its toll. We lavished our deprived foodie souls with Thai curries, spring rolls, pork satay, and some

mystery soup. The meal came in courses, rather half of it fell through the cracks and came quite late, but this is PNG, and we'd at least found taste, spice, and presentation. Besides, it was fun to soak in the city, watching people of the business sector go on about their lives.

While paying up, we discovered we could shop next door for wine, and we scored some treasures to later enjoy by the Hideaway Hotel's poolside. Our joke became that they "hid away" the light bulbs, hangers, hot water, and functioning AC units, all with gracious hospitality uninterrupted.

Shopping was the order of the day this afternoon. At PNG Arts we loaded up, masks for Bud, chosen for the appeal of primitive appearance and color. Brenda also got masks, while Jean went for penis gourds (increasing her stash to three), and Peg accumulated more *bilums*. It took three stops to please us, from the warehouse to an outdoor market and on a roadside stand. The quality of the baskets took us all by surprise, sturdy, lovely, one after another a temptation. This was a fun, relaxing afternoon, and dinner by the pool at our funky hotel at this point seemed just right. There we compared notes on showers that did not work, the size and sound of fans (Jean and Peg's rivaled that of a small train), brought in AC failure compensation - life in PNG. More than that we reminisced on the amazing things we'd seen, from people to birds of paradise, indelible images we'd return to again and again. The place wears you out, yet draws you in, evocative in so many ways.



August 17 Variata National Park / Port Moresby

We woke early, ready to meet Daniel Wakro, a local birding guide, and his driver and helper at dawn. Off we went in pitch dark, winding through streets of Port Moresby, nearing the edge of town as light began. We could make out hills, and by first daylight we had grand scenery to admire. The route to this small national park, initiated in 1986, is winding and climbs steadily, making switchbacks across from a dramatic volcanic escarpment. We passed some of the PNG hydroelectric works, then through small settlements and finally onto protected park lands. What a difference it makes, with lack of settlement, bird life is abundant. We parked



near a traditional display area for PNG's "classic" bird of paradise, the one that inspires logos, the flag, and preservation of native birdlife - the Raggiana Bird of Paradise. We crept through a mixed pine, eucalyptus forest, happy to see a display perch out in the open and at fairly close range. We set up spotting scopes, and cameras and waited – and YES, the male flew in, calling. He was alert, listening to other males, but no female came to further inspire him. Daniel's rendition of his expression of waiting was priceless – describing the poor male's preening while "looking for the womans."

We did see another male flipped over in full display but not in such a photogenic location. Time to move on. Birds were calling, and over the course of the morning we became more and more impressed with Daniel's skills. He knew every songster ahead of sighting the bird, and once on it was quick with the laser pointer to get us on it as well. We found many new species for our journey and got some great looks at distant birds. Memorable were scope views of Beautiful Fruit Dove, Ornate Honeyeater, Western Black-capped Lory, and Pygmy Drongo. We had



a real challenge as a mixed flock blew through, but in it sorted out Fairy and Yellow-bellied gerygones, Black Berrypecker (male and female), Chestnut Fantail, Yellow-breasted Boatbill, Pale-billed and Papuan scrub wrens, and Gray Whistlers. We worked very hard for only glimpses in quick flight of a Golden Whistler, though Elaine got a peek. We walked a forested road on a ridgeline, with species popping up one after another - Magnificent Riflebird, Varied Triller, Hooded Pitohui, Hooded Butcherbird, Green-backed Gerygones, and more. Wanting a break and some food, we drove down

to the campground, where we found a group of PNG University students working on botany projects. Brenda had a good chat with the professor, and all the while our local guides were searching. Bingo - Yellow-billed Kingfisher, great views. We also found a very staid and secretive Chestnut Cuckoo-shrike and enjoyed scope views. We wandered up a narrow trail after this, and the prize here for all votes was the Brown-headed Paradise Kingfisher, which perched in thick small trees close to ground level. The morning passed all too quickly. We had lunch in town at a restaurant in the mall, and had fun getting coffees, looking in the grocery (hypermarket), the bakery (where we selected tomorrow's early breakfast), and a few stores. Port Moresby was getting familiar and pretty friendly in our view. We asked Daniel far too many questions, really curious about the city, the country, how it all worked. He was so excited about the new Prime Minister, a man who had just announced he'd sell the private jet of Somare to help finance free education - 700 million Kina promised to accomplish that in the coming year. Several key government people had been jailed for corruption in the last few days. His elation was heartfelt.

In the afternoon we went back out to Pacific Adventist University (PAU) ponds. We had great light for photos of Comb-crested Jacanas, Purple Swamphens, Pied Herons, Wandering Whistling Ducks, Pygmy Geese, Willy Wagtails, and more. We enjoyed hearing Singing Starlings, watching Wattled Lapwings warn us away from a possible nest, or intended nest.... This was a most relaxing afternoon, with some great bird rewards. We tore ourselves away from the pond for a promise of Papuan Frogmouths, and - fun - we had several. In a grove of huge arching trees, they sat motionless, eyes closed, looking like branches. We got them in scopes, in cameras, drew in a few local kids to see them in our scopes. Our last stop was one more pond for a prize, Spotted Whistling Duck and three Rajdah Shelducks. Great day! To celebrate, we were getting the hang of life in PNG, we kept the dinner order simple, cheeseburgers down outside by the pool, where we could drink our earlier procured wine by the pool. Generous Jean brought out the final item of her stash of treats – two luscious chocolate bars. Divine.



Aug. 18

Return to Variata NP / Departures



This morning we left with high hopes as the day previous had been so incredible. We were due to leave the country after lunch, so it would be a short visit. We waited over an hour for the Raggiana to display, but females just were not around for the spark. So we tried some focused birding for difficult species, Hook-billed Kingfisher, Red-breasted Pitta, and others, and, no matter how hard Daniel tried, we failed. We did pick up a few new things, and had a flash of Doria's Hawk, which was a prize. Time passed quickly. We returned to freshen up, pack, and go for lunch and last purchases of baskets across from the Holiday Inn. With shopping on our agenda, it made most sense to eat there, and it was a good transition back into modern life as we enjoyed a great buffet ahead of boarding our flight. Across the street the vendors recognized us, and we had a very enjoyable time making our last purchases. PNG had worn us out, but after a few hot showers and rest, we knew we'd have memories of a lifetime. Such is the adventure to PNG!

