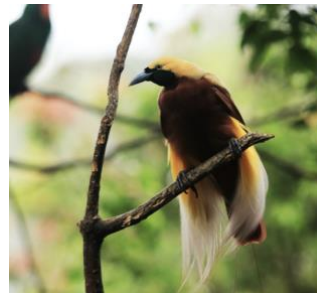
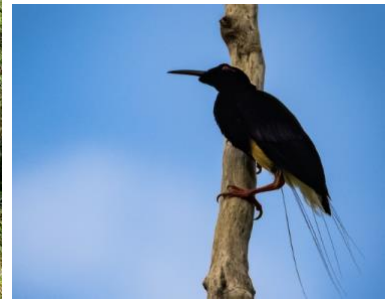


Papua New Guinea: Bucket List Birding

Aug. 2 – 15, 2023 | Trip Report | by Angus McNab



With local guide, Angus McNab and participants: Carol, Jerome, Kathleen, Les, Patty, Peder, Sue, and Susan



Wed., Aug. 2

Today we met for dinner and had a chat about the plan for the coming weeks. Many people had spent a few days in the Cairns area and it seemed everyone was pretty excited for what was to come!

Thurs., Aug. 3

It was an extremely early start, even for a birding tour, but out the door at 5 am to the airport. Check in was a smooth process and before long we were bound for Papua New Guinea! Our arrival at Port Moresby was made easier by a local colleague, who took us through money exchange and the check in process. In no time at all we were waiting for our second flight to Mt Hagen. But not without spotting a few birds, Eurasian Tree Sparrow and Glossy Swiftlet, on the way. Upon arrival we were met by James and Joseph who led us and our gear to the bus and took us to Rondon Ridge. The drive was short, but Pied Bush Chat and two flocks of Hooded Mannikins slowed the process. We had a late lunch at the restaurant and as soon as we dropped our gear, we were off for our first proper birding with our local guide Joseph. There were a few birds around the lodge including Black Kite, Buff-banded Rail, and Papuan White-eye. We walked up the hill to visit two more open areas with good views of fruiting trees. Black-billed Cuckoo-dove, Red-capped flowerpecker, Yellow-



browed Melidectes, and Common Smoky Honeyeater were great birds to start with but our first glimpse of a bird of paradise came in the form of Stephanie's *Astrapia* up in the canopy. Shortly after our second bird of paradise, the male Great Lophorina or Superb Bird of Paradise was spotted on an exposed treetop giving great views. A great way to end what is really a travel day we finished with a lovely dinner. After dinner the first rains in two weeks hit and it bucketed overnight.

Fri., Aug. 4

A 6 am breakfast for a 6:30 start is typical of a birding trip, but what we didn't expect is the amount of food...after filling ourselves with cereal, fruit, muffins and toast and preparing to leave out came the eggs and bacon, we were well filled for our morning hike. We worked our way up the hill to look at the two more open viewing areas for Birds of Paradise. Working our way up slowly we had Red-capped Flowerpecker and Common Smoky Honeyeater, probably our two most common birds so far. The Common Smoky threw us a little as we saw individuals with both red or yellow, or red and yellow facial skin. After deciding they must all be different species, we came across some other birds including White-shouldered Fairywren, Island Leaf Warbler, and the loud and screechy Yellow-browed Melidectes. As we watched a male Superb Bird of Paradise put on a show and was displaying in a high tree. A real bonus, as seeing the birds is one thing, watching them display is another! Mountain Myzomela and Hooded Mannikins were about as we waited, as was the constant calls of the Mountain Kingfisher – which we didn't see. Walking back down the trail we had brief views of a Rufous-throated Bronze Cuckoo.

We took a turn and headed up another set of trails, well carved into the hill and walked up and up and up to see a McGregor's Bowerbird bower. On the way up we saw some McGregor's Bowerbirds and some were lucky enough to spot the Blue Bird of Paradise and Yellow-streaked Honeyeater. After reaching the top we wandered back down and had a few pockets of activity with Mountain Mouse-warbler, Papuan Scrubwren, Papuan Lorikeet, Rufous-naped Bellbird and Sclater's Whistler, amongst others.

Lunch and a well-earned break saw most people take a nap before we headed out again in the afternoon. The resident Dwarf Cassowary was intrigued by our presence which was nice because no other birds took much interest in us for the afternoon. It was bright and sunny but soon became clouded over and then fogged in. we walked and walked and there was the odd bird calling here and there but for the most part it was a very quiet afternoon. It wasn't all bad, it was a lovely walk and we saw Amboyna Cuckoo-dove, Yellow-

billed Lorikeet, and finished the day the same way we finished yesterday with an Ornate Honeyeater feeding up in the tree at the lower observation point.

Sat., Aug. 5

This morning we headed straight out on the bus with Harold and Joseph, our guides and headed to Kumul Lodge about an hour's drive from Rondon Ridge and high on another mountain top. No sooner had we pulled up to Kumul Lodge and piled out of the bus that we see our first male Ribbon-tailed *Astrapia* in the misty rainforest around the grounds. Inside the complex we were quickly ushered to the balcony where we sat and looked out after several tables were loaded with fruit just below us. Instantly Brown Sicklebills came in and started gulping down chunks of fruit! A range of birds used the feeding tables, most obviously the bully birds that were Belford's *Melidectes*. We saw Common Smoky Honeyeaters female Ribbon-tailed *Astrapia*, and a male without a tail, Island Thrush, and Brehm's Tiger Parrot. It was the male Ribbon-tailed *Astrapia* with its super long tail that was probably most exciting: this bird was breathtaking.

The show was almost stolen by the Common Dasyure who spent a considerable amount of time foraging on the tables, ground and high in the trees. Its antics were fun to watch, totally ignored by all the birds. Lunch was a somewhat broken affair, the food was great, but lorikeets kept appearing as we tried to eat so in and out we ran for Papuan (Stella's) Lorikeet and Plum-faced Lorikeet, Grey-streaked Honeyeater, and Eastern Crested Berrypecker. The rain drizzled all day, but we still went for a walk in the extremely mossy forest. As we went to leave, Jerome yelled, 'Susie come look', and there was the male Brown Sicklebill feeding on the table! It was our one view of the male of this species, and a good laugh for everyone. Our walk was stunningly beautiful, birds were quiet which seems to be an afternoon trend, but we got great looks at a male Black-breasted Boatbill, Mountain Mouse-warbler and Papuan flycatcher. It was a challenging walk over the many fallen branches, trees, and through the wet trails but it was a great end to our afternoon. With one last look at the feeding tables, we headed back to Rondon Ridge

Sun., Aug. 6

Another early, mist covered morning though this morning we had two specific targets...at the top of the mountain range. It was a slow walk, about 100ft elevation gain, and honestly I don't know how long it was, but we stuck together and without many stops we made it to the top in just under two hours. Almost instantly we had the King of Saxony Bird of Paradise calling and just as some of us locked eyes on it, it dropped from the canopy (and wasn't to be seen again for about 3 hours). The bird called over the next few hours but managed to sit somewhere that we couldn't see it. There were plenty of other birds to see Black-throated Honeyeater, Rufous-backed Honeyeater, Black-breasted Boatbill, Brown Sicklebill, Yellow-billed Lorikeet amongst others. On two occasions as we watched a Black Sicklebill flew across in front of us giving brief views. Finally, just as our guide was considering it time to leave the sun broke through the mist and the King of Saxony flew into the fruiting fig we'd been watching for hours! It put on quite a show as we watched moving through the trees with its excessively long eyebrow ribbons. The walk down seemed much quicker and easier than the walk up, but this may have been due to the constant looking and photographing of orchids and other flowers. The forest was full of orchids, every tree had something growing in it!

After the strenuous morning we had an easy afternoon, some napped and relaxed while a few walked the grounds of the resort, using the sunshine to try and improve on photographic opportunities. Papuan White-eye, Red-collared Myzomela, and the Ornate Honeyeater were prime candidates, while the Yellow-billed Kingfisher remained unphotographed.

Mon., Aug. 7

Today we had a bit of a break from birding, taking a cultural day to visit some local villages and experience traditional cultures of the western highlands. A few keen members of the group were up at 6:15 to try their luck with the birds. The fog came and went, and we walked the narrow forest trails without Joseph. Birds were few and far between and we caught glimpses in the rain, but it was challenging. We got a fleeting view of a Shrikethrush but couldn't really work out what it was. There was also a most magical ringing ethereal sound that we recorded in hope for later identification. Walking back down the track we reacquainted ourselves with the Shrikethrush as it sang in the canopy. Moving back and forward we were able to get good views and a real team effort of recording calls checking the guidebook and new taxonomies we determined we had a Sepik-Ramu Shrikethrush!

We headed off on the bus at 9 am and made our way over to a village near 'Sweet Potato Mountain'. We were greeted by a number of people and moved back through the forest to a small grass 'tent' that was traditionally used for catching Birds of Paradise and other potential food items through the construction of a small pond and a spear. Young boys from the village showed us the traditional method of calling for rain and food during dry conditions.

At a second village, a local greeted us with a bow and arrow and showed us the courtship procedures and songs used to win over a potential suitor. Andrew and his family were welcoming, showing us how the women live, cook meals, and raise children in huts that men could not enter. On the creek edge we saw how children were hidden during periods of fighting/tribal warfare and showed us how well he could use his bow! Our final stop was at the village of the fearsome Mud Men. The mud men had lost much of their land and created masks of local white mud, covering themselves in the mud and scaring the people who had taken their land back to where they had come from. I think everyone felt the uneasiness that would have come from the noises they made, the masks, and weapons that were used to fight for the regaining of their lands. Having experienced a different side to Papua New Guinea we returned to Rondon Ridge. For a few of the group there was still time to bird and the highlight of the late afternoon though was the last 15 minutes of the day. As we stood at the higher viewpoint, Patty noticed some movement in the canopy as a bird dropped into the flowering 'donkey kong' trees. A female Blue Bird of Paradise was feeding in the open and for the next 10 minutes we watched as it moved in and out of view up and down the individual flowering fronds!

Tues., Aug. 8

Our morning started like the day before ended, with a Blue Bird of Paradise! We were searching for the Short-tailed Paradigalla that Joseph had seen the morning before, but any Bird of Paradise was a win for us. It was just a brief morning birding as we had to leave at 7:30 to get our plane to Karawari Lodge. We got the bus back to Mt Hagen and our chartered flight, flown by Sam, took us over the city, into the mountains and over the seemingly untouched highlands. The views were spectacular, it was a smooth flight with lakes, mountains, forests and thatched roofs. A little grass runway surrounded by trees was all we had to land on and there were probably 60 people there to see us arrive. The lowlands were noisier with birds than the mountains and notably hotter and humid. Yellow-billed Kingfisher, Blyth's (Papuan) Hornbill, Oriental Dollarbird and Papuan Eclectus were seen before getting 10m from the aeroplane. We boarded a boat with Chris, our local guide, and boat driver Clemence. It was a stunning river cruise to the lodge with more Eclectus, Imperial Pigeons, and a new range of birds to see.

After lunch and a slight reprieve from the heat under fans we had an afternoon cruise upriver. The birds were all completely new and there were no Common Smoky Honeyeaters to be seen. We did however quickly meet the Oriental Dollarbird...this was to be the new common bird that was spotted everywhere. It was still

hot throughout the afternoon, starting to cool at about 5:30 pm. Despite the heat we cruised along spotting Great-billed Heron, Black-capped Lory, Red-cheeked Parrots, and Yellow-faced Myna. As the heat cooled, we pulled into a small 'beach' and spent some time looking back across the river into the forest. Lories were coming through non-stop, a Glossy-mantled Manucode, Hooded Butcherbird, and a Palm Cockatoo landed in a palm just down river! It was a great ending to the day and as we cruised back to the lodge a pair of Blyth's Hornbills flew over the top, essentially completing Patty's trip. I'm pretty sure she said she could go home now.

Wed., Aug. 9

It was an early start to head down to the local village and look for the Twelve-wire Bird of Paradise. We arrived just as the sun was starting to peek over the forest and walked into the village, just on the other side a single stick poked into the sky 4m above the canopy. Sitting on top in perfect silhouette was the male! Unfortunately, it quickly dropped as we got to the viewing area, but we waited for its return. While we waited other birds came past -- Black Sunbird, Grey-headed Goshawk, Black-browed Triller, and one and then two female Twelve-wire Bird of Paradise. The male didn't return, and the sun continued to rise, hitting the display post and ending our chance of its return today. We jumped back in the boat and continued downstream.

We didn't go far to another set of houses and pulled in for better views of a Hooded Butcherbird. Jumping out of the boat we wandered up through the houses into an open area with food plants and a great 270-degree view of the surrounding forest. Papuan Eclectus, Brown Oriole, Sulphur-crested Cockatoo, and Red-cheeked Parrot were flying around the trees, a pair of Edward's Fig-parrot were looking at nesting options, and Pinon's Imperial Pigeons were displaying! We continued downstream and soaked in the birds, one of the more interesting being a Long-tailed Honey Buzzard that was so heavily worn it was amazing that it could still fly. The afternoon we again ventured downstream. Shining Flycatchers, Azure Kingfisher, Coconut Lorikeet, and big numbers of Dusky Lories flew by looking for places to roost. A single Common Sandpiper was our first shorebird of the trip, and possibly the first bird we'd seen on the mud/sand flats. The day ended with Chris spotting a Brush Cuckoo from about 200m sitting on a branch...He has great eyes.

Thurs., Aug. 10

As we didn't get the greatest of views of the Twelve-wire Bird of Paradise yesterday we returned to the village, earlier today, to try again. We watched and waited and a bird flew up onto the display post...an Oriental Dollarbird. We watched for over an hour and heard the male in the distance and caught a glimpse of a female flying by but didn't get the bird back on the post. It wasn't all bad, we had a Blyth's Hornbill fly over at close proximity which allowed us to hear the unmistakable beating sound of the wings. We headed to a side branch of our river for the rest of the morning, the Arafundi River. Where the rivers met was one of the more beautiful and well-made villages with a big population. Again, we waved and smiled as the kids jumped around, waved, and danced as we cruised past. A Stout-billed Cuckooshrike and Meyer's Friarbird were seen in the trees and while we watched Chris picked up on the call of a King Bird of Paradise. We pulled to the side, and he went to see if he could find it. In no time at all we were climbing up the muddy embankment and walking into the forest. High in the canopy was the bright red and clean white bird. We had to work for it and views were fleeting as it moved around between 3 trees. We must have watched for an hour as people got views at different angles, but rarely for long. Despite some good views I don't know that we managed any photos, but it was a great experience to work for the bird.

Continuing upriver we moved out of the river into the Yimas Lakes, large open expanses of water that stretched out in front of us. The bird life here differed with Pied Herons, Black-winged (Pied) Stilts, Little Pied

Cormorants, Whiskered Terns, and more wetland type birds dominating. The weather was hot, and the water was shallow, but we moved around as we could, seeing lots of local fishing and some catching fish while we watched. We cruised back late in the morning, delaying lunch by about two hours but I think it was worth it! The afternoon heat was uncomfortable and given the short turnaround from our morning session, we had a very slow afternoon cruising along the Arafundi River, listening to the White-bellied Thicket Fantail which had a beautiful call but never showed itself. After a long day a few brave souls continued into the night having a night walk down to the creek line. We didn't get any birds, but spiders, mole crickets, and a few species of ground and tree frog were worth the walk.

Fri., Aug. 11

Having got a good gist of the river and its inhabitants we spent the morning headed downstream in search of Twelve-wire Bird of Paradise. We didn't head back to the village but cruised past a few other know display posts. We left in the dark, for the best opportunity and we lucky to catch a Papuan Nightjar returning to its roost just as the first light of the sun was exposing the river, The male Twelve-wire didn't want to be seen but there were a few females that perched high on exposed branches and others that flew across the river. We floated and watched, floated and listened, there were still a few other targets and we got lucky with a Victoria Crowned Pigeon flying over lower the water in front of us. This wasn't a regular pigeon but a near Brush-turkey sized pigeon! With a resplendent crown, and pale blue and purple plumage, it was probably the only bird to rival any of the Birds of Paradise we had seen. We watched for quite a while as the bird (or a second bird) moved up onto an exposed branch in a large tree. Having had a very long day the day before we took an earlier lunch break and had a bit longer break before heading out for the afternoon. We went back upriver for the afternoon, and went beyond where we had previously motored. Before turning around to float back down river it was nice to enjoy some cold drinks that had been snuck onboard in the heat of the afternoon. We floated down river, seeing Blyth's Hornbill, Palm Cockatoos, Brush Cuckoos, and Black Cicadabirds. Returning to the lodge in the early evening there was a large number of people around. Lots of children and the sound of music. We had our dinner but had to postpone our bird list for the evening as there was something much more enjoyable to see. The Karawari String Band put on a show for us and the other guests of the lodge! A group of around 20 men played a variety of instruments, including tuned bamboo pipes hit with the sole of a shoe, and sang us 7-8 songs, including one about kookaburras. The children from the village had come and had a great time dancing to the music. It was the first time we had seen any young girls from any of the villages, and I think they loved being out for the evening.

Sat., Aug. 12

Today was to be a half travel day, we were up early and for the last time we would hear 'Watch your head, mind the gap' as Chris helped us in and out of the car, boat, and plane. We were back on the runway early and Sam our pilot checked the plane whilst we listened to both Zoe's Imperial Pigeon and Coroneted Fruit-dove calling, unfortunately not getting the time to see them. We flew back to Mt Hagen, and got straight on the bus to Rondon Ridge, returning to our original accommodation to collect some belongings and prepare for our flight home the next day. We did get a little birding in, we wandered the narrow trails and managed to get onto a Blue-grey Robin just as the first drops of rain started to fall. Unfortunately, it fell quite heavily and we had to move back to the accommodation, getting wet on the way. The afternoon was spent sleeping by most as the rain fell and limited our opportunity to get out and look for any birds. We watched *First Contact*, a movie about the first white people to visit and exploit the highlands of Papua New Guinea. I think it was interesting for everyone and certainly was much more recent than any of us had expected.

Sun., Aug. 13

Our final day in Papua New Guinea was mostly a travel day, but not entirely, we started before breakfast and had one last crack at whatever we could get. The Common Smoky Honeyeater, Glossy Swiftlets, and Red-capped Flowerpecker were present and of course our most consistent bird, the Ornate Honeyeater. It was a nice last morning but before long it was time to go. James got us back to the Mt Hagen airport, and we were straight through to Port Moresby. Our layover in Port Moresby didn't go exactly to plan but we were able to make the most of it, with the purchasing of chocolate and coffee. A few hours later and we were airborne, and then back where it all began in Cairns.

Mon., Aug. 14

Today started down at the Cairns foreshore and it was full of birds. The sun was shining, yet it was still cool enough to enjoy the sun's warmth. Birds came thick and fast – White-breasted Woodswallows, Silver Gulls, Rainbow Lorikeets, Australian Swiftlets, Welcome Swallows, Peaceful Doves, and Varied Honeyeaters were quickly spotted as we scanned the beach to find where the shorebirds were. We didn't see much but walked towards the group of gulls and terns towards the city end and it was worth it. Scaly-breasted Munia, Magpie-lark, and a fruiting tree full of Australasian Figbirds and Metallic Starlings provided a lot of entertainment as the Swiftlets zoomed around at eye level. We walked towards the northern end of the beach and came across an extremely accommodating Double-eyed Fig-parrot which allowed us to watch from within 5m for at least 5 minutes. We were in turn watched by the many onlookers who couldn't see what we were looking at and gave us even stranger looks. Towards the northern end of the beach, we had a beautiful adult Black-necked Stork, Greater Crested Tern, Grey-tailed Tattlers, Sacred Kingfishers and a Superb Fruit-dove! The Mangrove Robin was less accommodating, but we'd try for that again later. A quick break whilst a vehicle was collected and then we were off to the Cairns Botanical Gardens. We walked down through the rainforest boardwalk towards centenary lake spotting Australian Brush-turkeys, Helmeted Friarbirds, Macquarie Turtles, Rainbow Bee-eaters, and Australasian Grebes. Garden maintenance meant there was a lot of noise around the main section of the lakes but it didn't matter too much as there was still plenty to see. We tried for Papuan Frogmouths unsuccessfully but as we reached the end of the walk we heard a Green Oriole, which we also didn't see but it sparked a small flurry of activity with a Black Butcherbird and Barred Cuckooshrike coming out into view. We finished up at the gardens having a look through the orchid and fern garden and then headed to the boundary of the gardens to find a pair of Papuan Frogmouths sleeping in a Podocarpus.

Lunch was back down on the foreshore which looked very different with the tide having receded hundreds of meters out, leaving exposed mud flats. The aptly named, Muddy's café was surrounded by Common Myna and Rock Doves which were quick to look for scraps. We finished the afternoon in along the Mangrove Boardwalk enjoying one of Australia's most magnificent accessible mangrove forests. Birds were quiet but it was nice to be able to look at fully grown tree sized mangroves. Dinner was at a lovely little Balinese restaurant along with a couple other groups. It was nice to meet other nature lovers and share stories before we all to go our separate ways the next morning.

Tues., Aug. 15

Heading out along the Esplanade again this morning we wanted to find the Mangrove Robin that evaded us the day before. There were plenty of people and birds along the foreshore, most of the birds we saw yesterday but we got better views of White-bellied Cuckooshrike and had a line of about 25 White-breasted Woodswallows on a palm frond. Reaching the northern end of the beach a few fruiting trees were full of male and female Australasian Figbirds, Varied Honeyeaters were screaming, and the shorebirds of yesterday appeared to not have moved. Susie was quick to spot a Rose-crowned Fruit-dove hiding in the canopy and

we got better views than yesterday. We wandered the mangrove edges, and in time most of the group caught a glimpse of the Mangrove Robin. It wasn't what we'd hoped but there may be time again, and we had to go. Passing the fruiting trees we found a Rose-crowned Fruit-dove perched in the sun, in the open and on full display! We managed to draw quite a crowd as we watched the bird preen, call, and sunbathe, it was quite exquisite.

I'd like to thank everyone for making this trip as memorable as it was, for me and hopefully for each other. This trip was made that easier by everyone looking for birds, finding birds, and even more so helping each other see the birds. Birding in the dense forest was difficult, even when viewing from openness of the boat, and I feel we all did a great job of enjoying the birds and making sure everyone else enjoyed the birds. We saw some spectacular birds (and a dasyure) and got to see life in a very different part of the world. I hope you all enjoyed the experience and know that I'd happily do it all with you again anytime.

Photos: Group Photo (Angus McNab), Blyth's Hornbill, Twelve-wire Bird of Paradise, Brehm's Tiger Parrot, Lesser Bird of Paradise, Oriental Dollarbird, Yellow-billed Kingfisher, Group Birding (Angus McNab), Orchid (Angus McNab)