

Papua New Guinea

Where Birds of Paradise and Other Beautiful Birds Abound

by Cyril Laubscher, Kent England

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Introduction

As a small, tearful, six-year-old boy on his first day at school in January 1945, the teacher took pity on me and offered me a book to look at. This was my first introduction to the wonders of nature, and I shall never forget the beautiful colour paintings of Birds of Paradise that I saw in the book.

My teacher explained what they were, and little did I realize it at the time, but that was undoubtedly the start of a lifetime interest in nature, and birds in particular.

Anyone who has seen a live adult male Bird of Paradise will know what a beautiful bird it is. Many will have seen

some of the 42 species in television documentaries. Apart from Papua New Guinea, Irian Jaya and some of the surrounding islands, including Halmahera and Batjan Islands in the Moluccas, Birds of Paradise are not found anywhere else in the world.

Zoos that have been fortunate enough in the past to obtain these magnificent birds for display, have always treasured them. Nowadays, they are scarcer than ever. They feature greatly in Papua New Guinea tribal culture, and the feathers are used as adornments for ceremonial dress among the men.

Today, all Birds of Paradise are

totally protected in Papua New Guinea. No part of a Bird of Paradise, not even a feather, may be traded or bought by a tourist.

Papua New Guinea, The Mystical Land

Papua New Guinea (abbreviated to PNG as it is affectionately known by many travellers) is second only to its southern neighbor, Australia, in the claim for the largest island. Its Equatorial climate is ideal for outdoor pursuits, but it has some of the most inhospitable terrain to traverse, with high jagged mountains, vast expanses of dense jungle, and an incredible array of fauna and flora that needs to

A Hooded or New Britain Mannikin Lonchura spectabilis.



Photo by Cyril Laubscher



Native to Papua New Guinea, the Blue-faced Parrotfinch is a popular aviary bird.

be seen to be believed. Many places in PNG are accessible only by air.

Papua New Guinea is one of the most fascinating places to visit. Populated by some 4,000,000 people belonging to various tribes, there are over 700 languages spoken between the different tribes. The cultures are as diverse as the colorful tribes. Cannibalism, headhunting, and other equally abhorrent practices were only recently abolished. When we visited Papua New Guinea, it was different from anything else that my wife and I had experienced before.

We soon realized – because of the limited time available – that the best way forward was to arrange for an organized tour to visit the Southern Highlands where we could see and enjoy some of the cultural heritage of the Huli Wigmen, one of the most interesting tribes in PNG. I had also learned that there were a fair number

of Birds of Paradise, and many parrots in this area.

Ambua Lodge was chosen as the focal point for all our bird activities. What we really wanted to see was the abundant and varied bird life that prevailed in this area. As soon as we went down to our chalet after booking in, we were entertained by a flock of Hooded or New Britain Mannikins (*Lonchura spectabilis*) right in front of our chalet. They were clambering up and down the stems of the long, tall (about 2 meters high) seeding grass growing at the edge of the jungle right below us. This occurrence was repeated at regular intervals during our five-day stay at the lodge. These mannikins are widely bred by aviculturists in Holland and around the world.

My First Sighting of a Bird of Paradise in the Wild

The scenery around the lodge was

incredibly beautiful. On the first morning about an hour after sunrise, I was standing on the porch of our chalet watching the beautiful valley that seemed to stretch to eternity, when suddenly, a large blackish bird with a long black tail landed in the tree about 20 meters in front of me. I stood in amazement watching an adult male Princess Stephanie's *Astrapia* (*Astrapia stephaniae*) slowly turn its head towards me, and as the early morning sun's rays lit up the bright green iridescent throat patch that is a diagnostic feature of a male, I was very excited. I had seen my first Bird of Paradise in its natural environment. What a sight!

That evening I was able to see two other Birds of Paradise – two male Ribbon-tailed (*A. mayeri*) with their two long white tail feathers streaming behind as they flew from tree to tree on either side of the road. This sighting was about five minutes slow drive



This male Whiskered Lorikeet, Oreopsittacus arfaki, is a little jewel of a parrot.

from Ambua and it was about an hour before sunset. Then, further sightings were obtained of male Princess Stephanie's Astrapia feeding in a tree about 50 meters away from the edge of the highway.

This was followed by a solitary sighting of the unmistakable male King of Saxony's Bird of Paradise (*Pteridophora alberti*) – with its two long enamel-like head feathers with attached tiny little flag-like appendages that glow with a bright enamel-colored blue that is quite dazzling.

No doubt there were females around, but they pale into insignificance because of their drab plumage when compared with the brilliantly colored males.

On a trip to one of the villages lower down the valley, we found out about a display area that was currently being used by a male Lawe's Parotia (*Parotia lawesii*). My guide helped me to build a makeshift hide from where I wanted to try and photograph the male as he came down to display. Unfortunately, this was not successful

as there was some rain each day, which necessitated a quick removal of all the camera equipment. But I did see the male on two occasions in the trees above.

About two hundred meters away, the strident harsh call of a male Superb Bird of Paradise (*Lophorina superba*) provided a clue where we could see the bird foraging for fruit and insects, the mainstay of its diet. While watching the Superb, my attention was drawn to the unmistakable call of a small flock of Green-naped Lorikeets (*Trichoglossus*

baematodus) as they flew over the tops of the trees in the dense forest. A little later, we saw two Musschenbroek's Lorikeets (*Neopsittacus musschenbroekii*) feeding quite high up on some unidentified fruit or seeds of a large tree growing in the vicinity.

Lorikeets abound in this area, and a number of species that are bred in aviaries can be seen in and around Ambua Lodge. One of the most beautiful is the Papuan or Stella's Lorikeet (*Charmosyna papou*), commonly seen around the lodge. Huli Wigmen's head-dress used at ceremonial events, often have the tail of this lorikeet in their wigs. Dusky Lories fly over the trees around the lodge regularly in the evenings.

I managed to see the diminutive Whiskered Lorikeet (*Oreopsittacus arfaki*) on a number of occasions feeding either on flowers or on berries and fruit. In one tree, which appeared to be a *Ficus* spp, Papuan Lorikeets flew into feed, closely followed by a single Whiskered


Lorikeet. About 20 minutes later, two Emerald Lorikeets (*Neopsittacus pullicauda*) landed in another tree nearby, and then moved over to feed in the same tree as the Papuan and Whiskered Lorikeets. A pair of Goldie's Lorikeets was another species seen only on one occasion while feeding further down the road back towards the lodge.

On the way to seeing the colorful Tit Berrypecker (*Oreocharis arfaki*) at Tari Gap, I was pleased to watch about six Blue-faced Parrotfinches (*Erythrura trichroa*) feeding along the side of the road. This parrotfinch is widely kept and bred by aviculturists in Holland and other countries. One of the specialties that I wanted to see was the Mountain Firetail (*Oreostruthus fuliginosus*), a scarce and attractive plump brownish finch with red flanks that is regularly recorded at Tari Gap, but we were unsuccessful.

On the final day we went up to a village owned by our guide's uncle. This was situated about half way

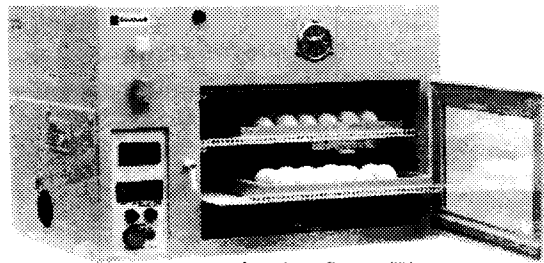
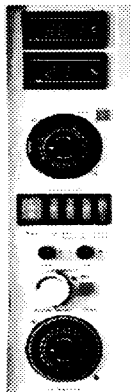
between Ambua Lodge towards Tari Gap about 30 minutes drive from Ambua, where many Birds of Paradise have been filmed for television documentaries.

A Black-cheeked Robin (*Poecilodyas albispecularis*) was nesting in the forest near the village. I was fortunate to photograph it at the nest as it returned to brood its newly hatched nestling. Strangely, it has never before been recorded in the Ambua Lodge area, but is a fairly common montane species in many areas of the highlands of Papua New Guinea.

As we approached the village, a male Ribbon-tailed Bird of Paradise suddenly took off from a low branch where it had been feeding on fruit, and flew across right in front of us at a distance of about 30 meters. My wife could not believe that this incredibly beautiful bird would be so close to us. This memorable sighting is one among many that will stay with us forever, and was a fitting finale to a wonderful trip. 

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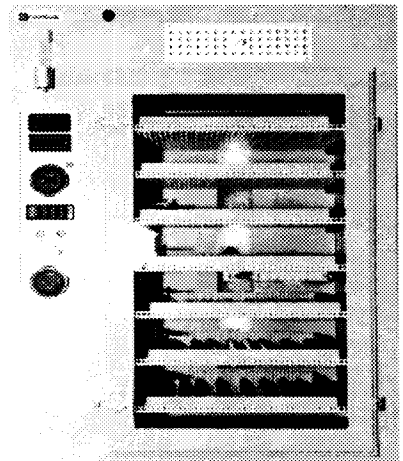
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