

A Pygmy Parrot Surprise:

Micropsitta bruijnii bruijnii
Extends its Range to Seram?

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At first, I had no idea they were pygmy parrots. In fact, I'll embarrass myself thoroughly and admit that I didn't even recognize them as parrots. They had a most unparrotlike disposition, these sparrow-sized birds fluttering through the Seram sub-canopy.

While perching in the rainforest trees of north central Seram, photographing (and waiting to photograph) birds, I'd read through most of the species descriptions of Coates and Bishop's *Birds of Wallacea*. A few times. And still I didn't know who these little visitors were. But I was more anxious to get photos than an immediate ID. Shoot first, ask questions later, is the key to getting pictures of tiny, hyperactive birds like these.

Maneuvering 700mm of lens into position, I examined my new friends with the aid of magnification. At 10 meters off, in a neighboring tree, these birds still seemed miniscule. Ten centimeters long (3.9 inches), at best. But now I could really make out their jewel-like colors – shimmering green wings, red breast, royal blue collar, orange cheeks, ruddy brown crown. I might have counted 10 little birds, had I been able to count. The flock was constantly on the move, and mostly hidden most of the time. In a frenzy, they hopped up and down limbs, grazing on some invisible quarry – bits of fungus, perhaps, or the occasional invertebrate. They had a sense of urgency about them, as if it were a struggle taking in calories faster than their little hearts burned them up. In fact, this is probably true. Scientists have had a hard time studying pygmy parrots in captivity. They refuse to take

food and simply burn themselves out within a matter of hours.

These wild pygmy parrots didn't walk or waddle like parrots should. Every movement was a hop, skip or jump, or a quick diving flight to greener grazing territory. Nor did these birds stand upright, like proper parrots. Their legs were constantly crouched, backs level with the tree limbs, bills grooming the smooth bark like high-powered Hoovers. The tight flock kept constant tabs on each member's position, or perhaps feeding status. "Tseek!" called one. "Tseek!" answered another. "I'm eating fungus. Are you eating fungus? Very nice fungus. But, oh, here's better fungus!" I couldn't help but find these birds cheery in a contagious sort of way.

Before I'd shot half a roll of film, my little friends were off. And we hadn't even been properly introduced. Another search through *Birds of Wallacea*, and I was still baffled as to how to classify the buggers. Fortunately, I was equipped to process film in the field, which allowed me and my trapper-turned-guide Buce Makatita to get a longer look at these mystery birds.

"Ah, nuri kecil," said Buce. He sounded like he was greeting a long lost friend.

"A 'little parrot'?" I asked. "Well, it is a bit like the Buru Red-breasted Pygmy Parrot *Micropsitta bruijnii pileata*. But the colors are wrong."

Buce looked at the plates in *Birds of Wallacea*. In the illustration, the Red-breasted Pygmy Parrot stood upright, and seemed to be resting, which must be something that only museum specimens of pygmy parrots do. The parrot pictured had very little blue coloration and a much fuller brown crown.

"Ya, ada jenis ini juga," said Buce. "Dan ini yang tadi foto. Dan satu lagi." In all, Buce recognizes three "little parrots" in Seram. The *M. bruijnii pileata* in *Birds of Wallacea*, the one I'd photographed, plus one other.

It wasn't until returning to the U.S. that I compared the pygmy parrot I'd photographed with Forshaw's description of the Red-breasted Pygmy Parrot

Micropsitta bruijnii bruijnii in *Parrots of the World*. My photographed specimens look a lot like *M. bruijnii bruijnii*, though this subspecies has previously been known only from montane New Guinea. I defer to systematists to argue if these Seram *Micropsitta bruijnii* are a new subspecies or an extension of the range of *Micropsitta bruijnii bruijnii*.

Either way, this still leaves one more of Buce's pygmy parrots at large. The most likely explanation is that islanders do not differentiate between male and female *M. bruijnii pileata*, which are nearly identical. Sexual dimorphism in *M. bruijnii bruijnii*, however, is pronounced. Locals may recognize the male and female of this subspecies (or an undescribed one very much like it) as two distinct forms. Oddly, I observed only birds that resembled male *M. bruijnii bruijnii*.

Another surprise is that I observed these pygmy parrots below 100m elevation. *M. bruijnii* is reported at elevations between 500 and 2,300 meters. Siebers (1930), however, cites villagers on neighboring Buru island who observe *M. bruijnii pileata* descending from mountainous regions during the dry months of October and November. It's possible that pygmy parrots are exhibiting a similar behavior on Seram. My observation occurred in September, one of the drier months on the northern side of the island.

On my next morning in the same kayu besi ("iron wood") tree, I was once more graced by gorgeous pygmies, again at about 8 A.M. It was a fleeting visit, the flock of 10 or so surrounding me in my very tree by Masihulan Baru village. The little parrots seemed unafraid, approaching as close as one and a half meters. But as I reached for a second camera body prepared for close shooting, the flock fluttered off in search of better grazing. For weeks to come, I perched in trees awaiting further sightings of Seram's tiny psittascene jewels. They never came. Pygmy parrots, it seems, are rare and precious gems on an island that has barely begun to be prospected by western eyes. 