

The parrots of Buton Island, South West Sulawesi

by Mark Catterall

I have been a member of the World Parrot Trust for a number of years and have a keen interest in parrot conservation. During 1996 I was involved, initially as a volunteer and subsequently as expedition leader, in a survey of the remote Indonesian island of Buton. This is located in south-east Sulawesi and the expeditions formed part of Operation Wallacea's Buton and Tukangbesi bird and marine surveys. The project has been running for over three years and I understand that there are proposals for it to continue over the next few years.

Buton has recently been designated as a transmigration site, despite being comparatively small (150km long by 10-30km across) and the unsuitability of many areas for agriculture. The island is coralline and large areas are exceptionally rugged, with little soil. Extensive areas in the south are covered in cashew-nut plantations and areas of poor subsistence cultivation. Forests in the south are largely restricted to the steeper slopes, although loggers are now moving into these areas. Large areas there have been designated as protected forest (watershed protection) but this appears to mean little. An extensive area of protected forest exists in the north, centred around Buton's only mountain which reaches an altitude of 1,100m.

Proposals are currently being considered for the upgrading of the

area into a national park but a large transmigration site has recently been established within the existing boundaries of the protected area. Huge areas of primary and mature secondary forest still exist, especially on the higher slopes. The aim of Operation Wallacea is to establish the national park in the north of the island and to encourage local initiatives in conservation. When the collected data is written up, it is hoped that recommendations will include educational programmes aimed at schoolchildren. I am hoping to obtain approval for a separate education programme for the Lesser Sulphur-crested Cockatoo. The Bupati (local governor) has expressed a great deal of interest and enthusiasm in the project as a whole, so this could well be successful.

LESSER SULPHUR-CRESTED COCKATOO *Cacatua sulphurea*

According to a recently completed status assessment by BirdLife International and the Indonesian Department of Nature Conservation (PHPA), populations of the Yellow-crested (or Lesser Sulphur-crested) Cockatoo have crashed since the 1970s. The subspecies *sulphurea* is known to have vanished from many parts of Sulawesi and the largest known population, in the Rawa Aopa Watumohai National Park, numbers only about 150 birds.

C.s.sulphurea is an uncommon and evidently localised species on Buton, which appears to occur predominantly in the drier forests in the south of the island. All birds were closely associated with forested habitats, including degraded forest. It was generally encountered in pairs and small groups of 3-9 birds. A total of 34 birds were recorded in 1996 from nine widely spaced squares, all in the south of the island. In 1995 nineteen birds were recorded from four squares, including the only northern record for this species - five birds seen near Maligano in north-west Buton. Fairly large areas of Buton have still to be surveyed, including extensive areas of lowland forest and more birds will undoubtedly be found. The total Buton population of the Yellow-crested Cockatoos is probably between 50-100 birds, but numbers are decreasing due to trapping and the species is under enormous pressure. Cockatoos are still widely trapped for the pet trade despite being fully protected by Indonesian law. No Yellow-crested Cockatoos were observed during brief visits to the Tukangbesi Island south-east of Buton in the Banda Sea, but surveys were restricted to the small island of Hoga. According to local people interviewed at Wanci on nearby Wangiwangi Island, the species is still present in small numbers but is widely trapped.

On November 5th, 1996, two Cockatoos were shot and injured at Airjatuh by local trappers during a visit by one of the survey groups. The police were called who arrested the two men involved and confiscated the birds. Both birds were observed chained to a tree outside the Bau-Bau Police Station later in November and the current fate of the birds is not known. A single, extremely wary bird remained at Airjatuh but was impossible to approach and was not observed to visit the nest cavity, although the bird appeared reluctant to leave the area. The fate of the young bird is unknown, although it is unlikely that the birds were removed from the nest as the huge tree in which the cavity is found is situated above a 50 foot high waterfall and is thus inaccessible. This site is the only known breeding site for this parrot on Buton; according to local people the site is used yearly by this species. The nest cavity was situated at the base of a thick clump of tree ferns on the main trunk of the tree. (The tree was also used by a pair of Red-knobbed Hornbill *Rhyticeros cassidix* - the hornbill cavity being some 2-3 metres higher up the tree). A number of captive Cockatoos were seen throughout the island (around 10 birds); all had been trapped locally. This species is readily available in the bird market at Kendari, where birds are offered for as little as US\$50.

ORNATE LORIKEET *Trichoglossus ornatus*

An incredibly beautiful lory which is common throughout Buton wherever there are flowering trees and patches of forest. It is most often seen in areas of more open woodland, secondary growth, forest edge, lightly wooded cultivation and coconut plantations. It was also noted in mangrove forest. It is regularly attracted to red-flowering trees along the sea-shore. Flight is swift and direct with very rapid wing-beats; it typically flies low above the tree tops. It is a noisy but difficult to observe species in the dense foliage of fruiting trees, despite its bright colouring. Locally nomadic on Buton but absent from certain areas where it was previously numerous, the occurrence of this lory obviously depends on the presence of



The Lesser Sulphur-crested Cockatoo is one of the species threatened by deforestation and trapping on Buton.

flowering and fruiting trees. As a very popular and commonly kept pet in most villages throughout Buton, populations must ultimately suffer as there is no regulation of the numbers caught. Most captive birds were tethered to the perches by wooden shackles - these were shaped like a figure of 8, the birds leg going through the smaller hole directly above the larger hole. The birds leg was thus always kept at an angle and a number of birds were seen to have badly damaged and dislocated legs.

MEYER'S LORIKEET

Trichoglossus flavoviridis meyeri

This is a highly localised and very rare species on Buton, with only a handful of records from areas of hill forest. It appears to be confined to areas of mature forest, and was never seen in the open. On mainland Sulawesi this species is shy and elusive, which could help explain the paucity of records on Buton. On mainland Sulawesi this lorikeet is confined to areas of hill and mountain forest, but it seems that mature forest, not altitude, is the limiting factor in the distribution of this species. It is threatened by forest clearance on Buton.

SULAWESI HANGING PARROT

Loroculus stigmatus

The commonest of the two hanging parrot species on Buton, it was regularly met with around habitation, especially in coconut plantations. Birds were frequently attracted to flowering trees in more open country. It inhabits a wide range of forested and wooded environments, including areas of mature forest, degraded secondary forest, forest edge, cultivation with scattered trees and mangrove forest. Generally encountered singly and in pairs or small flocks of 3-10 birds; occasionally in large concentration in flowering or fruiting trees. More conspicuous than *L. exilis*, particularly in fig trees and coconut palms, it is not particularly wary. In the morning, it is regularly observed perched in the open on the tips of rattan spikes above the tree tops. Flight is fast and direct, but slightly undulating. With care it is possible to identify this species in flight once the general size and frequency heard call are learnt. Hanging Parrots are not commonly kept as pets and only two birds were seen in captivity during 1996. Breeding was recorded between August and November during 1996.

GREEN HANGING PARROT

Loriculus exilis

Less common than *L. stigmatus*, it



Lesser Sulphur-crested Cockatoo nest near Baubau, the hole is situated at the base of the fern dump on the left trunk. A cockatoo is perched on a branch above the nest.

is found in smaller numbers and in fewer locations around the island. This parrot appears to be restricted to more forested habitats the *L. stigmatus*, where it keeps to the canopy. Repeatedly confused with *L. stigmatus* during the early stages of 1996, all Hanging Parrots without red crowns were attributed to the latter despite the fact that juvenile and female Sulawesi Hanging Parrots often have little or no red on the crown. It is thus inevitable that earlier records for this species are erroneous and misleading. Due to its small size, cryptic colouring, and habit of feeding quietly in the canopy of forest trees, this species was extremely inconspicuous and easily overlooked. In flight it appears tiny; flight is swift. It produces an indistinct short single very thin *psst*; frequently heard in flight. It was occasionally seen in the company of the larger Sulawesi Hanging-Parrot at fruiting trees. Never seen in captivity.

GOLDEN-MANTLED RACQUET-TAIL PARROT

Prioniturus platurus

A locally common even abundant species, frequenting areas of forest, especially in hilly areas. Generally in flocks of 3-15 birds, rarely singly. In one forest in the hills above Maligano over 150 birds were observed, during a 30 minute period, in the late afternoon flying high overhead in small (4-7 birds) loose flocks. Almost all birds were flying in a northerly direction, presumably to roost. - It is a difficult

bird to observe, being shy and very wary. Birds freeze in the foliage when approached, before exploding out of the canopy screeching loudly. Attracted to trees with small fruits and seeds, birds keep to the mid-storey and sub-canopy of larger trees. They were regularly observed hanging upside down in order to reach small fruits at the ends of thin branches. Noisy flocks were regularly encountered in most forested environments, although birds were surprisingly absent from some of the drier forests in the south. Flight was swift with continuous rapid wing-beats. Active and noisy at night, it often flies around at height screeching continuously. Two females seen in Maligano were the only evidence of this species in captivity. According to Forshaw, this Racquet-tail was formerly caught in large numbers on Buton. Reports of the much larger Yellow-breasted-Racquet-tail Parrot *Prioniturus flavicans* are in error and no substantiated records were made.

BLUE-BACKED PARROT

Tanygnathus sumatranus

An uncommon or locally common species on Buton, which was widely distributed, in inhabited areas of forest, including degraded secondary forest, open woodlands with remnant forest patches, and cultivation with scattered trees and scrub. It was frequently seen around habitation in the north, around Maligano. Generally difficult to

observe, in certain parts of the island birds were more easily approachable (presumably due to less persecution). Flight was relatively slow, but direct with shallow rapid wing-beats. It is very noisy when in flight, especially at night. Generally observed in pairs or small flocks of 3-7 birds; rarely it was seen singly or in larger flocks of up to 20 birds. Attracted to fruiting trees and ripening crops, it is often seen at night. A common bird in captivity, especially in the south of the island, seven birds were found in one small village.

An unusually coloured bird was seen on July 5th in forest near La Bundo-Bundo in the south-east of the island. General plumage was similar to the ordinary Blue-backed Parrot, but differed in having a brownish wash on the breast and neck, plus rufous-brown undertail feathers; the individual had a white bill and iris. The bird was seen clearly in the canopy of a large tree in the company of a pair of Great-billed Parrots *T. megalorynchos*. Forshaw describes a similar bird, the Rufous-tailed Parrot *Tanygnathus heterurus* which is only known from the type specimen (Forshaw, 1989). According to Forshaw this specimen probably represents an aberrant form of *T. sumatranus*.

GREAT-BILLED PARROT

Tanygnathus megalorynchos

Some confusion surrounded the identification of this species and the more widespread and abundant *T. sumatranus*. Great-billed Parrots are, however, present on Buton in small numbers. Most records are from the south of the island, particularly in coastal areas. They inhabit tall secondary forest, both in the lowlands and nearby hills, and in mangroves. Occasionally found in the company of *F. sumatranus*, although birds appeared not to mix. Found singly, in pairs and small flocks of 3-5 birds; a single record of 22 birds is the only large concentration of this species. It is present on the Tukangbesi Islands, and two birds were observed in November 1995 on the tiny island of Hoga. People in the Tukangbesi claim that this species is not uncommon in the few remaining forest patches. Available habitat on the four main islands in the Tukangbesi is an important centre for the illegal trade in parrots and other species. Birds from all over the region are shipped through the islands in order to meet local demand and for shipment out of the area.

