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American Zoo Consortium Papua New Guinea Project Report

by Ron Johnson, Curator of Birds,
Miami Metrozoo

and

Arthur Risser, General Manager,
San Diego Zoo

"Wonders from a celestial paradise . . . best known for their extraordinary courtship plumage . . . birds of paradise allied with the relatively drab, short-plumbed 'architects' and 'artists' — the bower birds have inspired fascination since their discovery by Europeans in 1522."

Thomas Gillard wrote these eloquent phrases in his book *Birds of Paradise*, 1964, which brings together many scientific expeditions, a true labor of love, searching for the secrets of these birds. A total of 2,500 books and scientific papers have been written about these inspiring birds; still, little is known about breeding, ecology, parental care and even geographical distribution of some species. There are 43 known species of birds of paradise, 33 found in Papua New Guinea, 12 of which are endemic.

New Guinea, the second largest island in the world, is divided politically into two countries. The western half, Irian Jaya, is governed by Indonesia. The eastern half, Papua New Guinea, became independent from Australian rule in 1975. The Melanesian people have literally developed from the stone age to the electronic era in two decades. Birds of paradise are woven culturally into the socio-economic status of the over 700 tribes throughout the island. Today, birds of paradise are still an important aspect of their lives and rituals. Sing sings (ceremonial festivals) bring together the diverse tribes, and clansmen are fully decorated in ornate headdress, displaying plumes from birds of paradise and other species such as lorries.

Add to this, only a few specimens alive within United States zoos, the allure of the "Forgotten Island" and you start to understand the bird curators' obsession, termed consortium — formally known as the American Zoo Consortium, Papua New Guinea Project. Why someone would traipse through the malaria-infested lowlands to the wet, icy-cold, moss covered mountain slopes in search of these birds needs only a glance of a

male in full display. The tropical rain forests of Papua New Guinea are alive with life, including some, as yet undiscovered, species which may be lost before they are ever known. The plight of rain forests worldwide is no less evident than in the timber camps of Mt. Giluwe or the gold mines at Ok Tedi.

The demise of the rain forest, education of the local people, preservation of habitat, and the support of the wildlife department bring together the elements of this salvage-collection operation. When a mature rain forest is lost, non-migratory, resident, tropical species of birds have no place to exist, and therefore die. Other suitable habitats are usually at carrying capacity. Nature has not provided a dispersal mechanism when large tracts of land are lost due to man's intervention. It is in this multifaceted problem that the Papua New Guinea consortium has its roots.

In 1982, Don Bruning, curator of ornithology at New York Zoological Society, set out to Papua New Guinea to collect birds with Roy Mackay, director of the Baiyer River Sanctuary. If permits were granted, New York would be allowed to export a pair of birds and the sanctuary would increase its captive flock — important to the education of the natives of Papua New Guinea. Permits were eventually granted after much discussion with Navu Kwapena, first assistant of conservation and fauna. This event set the stage and the beginning of the American Zoo Consortium Project.

The project was initiated in 1983 by the N.Y.Z.S. as an operation to salvage birds from areas of Papua New Guinea where forest habitat was scheduled for removal. That year, the other zoo members of the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums (AAZPA) who participated included Philadelphia, National and Denver. The cooperative project was designed to be mutually beneficial to the Wildlife Division, Office of Environment and Conservation, Papua

New Guinea, and those AAZPA member zoos that participated. Each zoo contributed a participation fee to be used to conduct biological surveys which would lead to the eventual establishment of nature preserves, wildlife management areas or sanctuaries. These areas will preserve suitable habitat, under government administration, for some of Papua New Guinea's unique fauna and flora.

Such an area was established in 1983 at the village of Ubai Gubi (southeast of Goroka) through the efforts of the New York Zoological Society (NYZS) and Pacific Helicopters Limited of PNG. It will serve as a model for other reserves to be established in the future. Tourists who visit such areas have an ideal opportunity to observe birds of paradise in nature, and aid the economy while promoting conservation. Thus, the American Zoo Consortium plays a role in the development of a conservation strategy for the country.

In 1984, four other zoos joined the project; Zoological Society of San Diego (ZSSD), Miami Metrozoo, Los Angeles and Dallas. Seven species of birds of paradise, as well as five other species, totalling 95 birds, were collected and shipped to the United States for captive breeding programs at the participating zoos. Legal export of wildlife from PNG can only be made to zoological institutions which petition and are then approved to receive wildlife by the government. It was also during this year that a botanical program was initiated by the ZSSD. Botanical specimens were also gathered from those same areas where bird collecting was taking place to provide suitable horticultural material for exhibits, as well as appropriate food plants for selected birds. A close association has been fostered with the Lae Botanic Gardens, as well as the National Botanic Gardens at the University of Papua New Guinea.

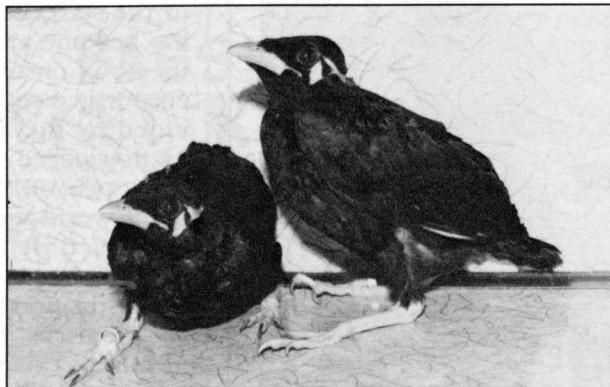
The government of Papua New Guinea requires that all wildlife to be exported first go to Baiyer River Sanctuary, a national park, 40 miles north of Mt. Hagen, Western Highlands Province. With the direction of the superintendent, the government maintains a captive breeding program for birds of paradise, as well as other vertebrate species. Selected species, both plant and animal, collected by the American Zoo Consortium and required by the Baiyer River Sanctuary for their purposes, are deposited there. In addition, a plant propa-

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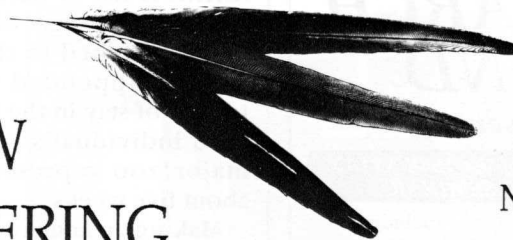


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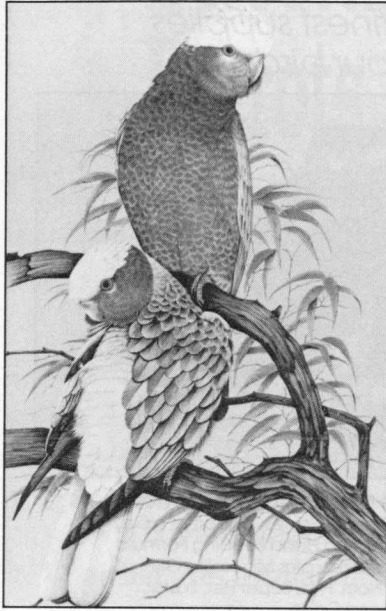
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gation nursery was initiated in 1984 with funds from ZSSD, and will serve as a working greenhouse for care and propagation of specimens collected in the future. Under the leadership of Superintendent Roy Mackay and his wife, Margaret, and with the support of the staff, Baiyer River Sanctuary has become a base of operation for the Zoo Consortium. The assistance, encouragement and consultation provided by the Mackays is gratefully acknowledged.

Because of PNG's unique position in the world and its biological as well as cultural richness, it is anticipated that the country will become a desirable destination for the worldwide travel programs many zoos offer their members. This will help educate zoological society members to the importance of habitat conservation in PNG, and provide a desirable economic advantage through tourism.

The 1985 Collecting Trip

Four zoos participated in the 1985 expedition: Zoological Society of San Diego, Los Angeles, Miami and New York Zoological Society. Woodland Park Zoo, Seattle, Washington, provided a representative who was returning to the United States after a keeper exchange program with Taronga Zoo, Sydney. His travel was paid by the Woodland Park Zoo Chapter of AAZK. A list of participants, volunteers or observers directly (or indirectly) attached to the Zoo Consortium is appended to this report. Length of stay in the field varied with each individual's schedule, but the major zoo representatives stayed about five weeks.

Making arrangements and working out logistics for an expedition over a long distance is difficult at best. Collecting and scientific research requires that each participant receive a business class visa (marked wildlife research), as opposed to a tourist's visa, which is normally issued in a matter of days from either New York or Washington. This year, visas were delayed until a proposal was provided to the PNG government, outlining in detail the members of the party, the general plan of study, and the areas in which collecting was to occur. Numerous phone calls were made between the U.S., PNG Mission in New York, the Embassy in Washington, and the Office of Environment and Conservation to sort out the requirements. With visas delayed, the expedition could not depart the U.S.

on a set date and had to be rescheduled, thus adding to the expense. In addition, exact collecting sites, assumed to be identified by NYZS, could not be finalized until arriving in PNG, and receiving appropriate approval.

Before departure for field collecting, it was necessary to have, in hand, permits for the following: importation of mist nets, use of mist nets, and collection of protected species of wildlife. These permits are issued only by the Office of Environment and Conservation, and can only be obtained after discussion with and approval from the appropriate issuing authority. Final details were worked out upon arrival in Port Moresby.

Mt. Giluwe —

The First Collecting Site.

The first collecting site was on the southern slopes of Mt. Giluwe (about 8,000 to 9,000 feet elevation) in a timber lease tract of the Beechwood Timber Ltd., located about sixty miles southeast of Mt. Hagen. The consortium field team was transported by Trans New Guinea Tours (TNT), a well-known tour coordinator in PNG. Due to a fully booked tourist schedule, it was not possible for TNT to provide transport other than to get personnel and equipment to the field site. Therefore, a mini-van was rented from Budget Rent-A-Car for field use. Selective timbering had taken place about eight to twelve months previously, and although virgin timber higher up on the slopes was due for future cutting, access was hampered by an almost impenetrable undergrowth of climbing bamboo. In addition, some of the local nationals, not understanding the lease agreement between the government and the timber company, attempted to block the timber company's access to the mature forests; there was an air of apprehension about confrontation between the timber company and the locals.

Only scattered, mature trees characterized the area to which we already had access, with the secondary growth in only a few month's time creating a remarkable understory. The avifauna of this area was limited primarily to scrub/thicket species that can survive in marginal and disturbed habitats. These species were relatively abundant, but largely difficult to maintain in captivity (many are highly insectivorous), and were therefore released after capture.

A species list was generated for documentation purposes. Specialized species such as the birds of paradise, although seen occasionally passing through at treetop level had, for the most part, disappeared. One of the net lines extending steeply up an abandoned logging road reached almost to mature forests, but operation of this line was physically exhausting and treacherous, especially after a rain.

Low success in the capture of species desired for captive breeding and the removal of specimens from the nets by locals prompted departure from the Mt. Giluwe site after seven days of effort.

Jimi River Valley — The Second Collecting Site

The second collecting site was arranged through contacts made at the Public Works Department in Mt. Hagen. Through the courtesy of the Jimi River Cattle Company (Jim Gentle, manager), our team was allowed to collect birds in the ecotone between forest and pasture. Six thousand cattle graze on this 45,000 acre ranch and there are plans to enlarge the natural Kunai grassland by pushing the forest back to the surrounding mountain slopes. This will be accomplished over the next three to five years by bulldozing and cut/burn techniques. Substantial lowland habitat will thus be removed. However, a small piece of this forest habitat has already been designated for protection as a national park (personal communication with Roy Mackay).

Bird life in the Jimi Valley is particularly abundant, especially in the undisturbed, forested borders of the rivers. Papuan hornbills, white cockatoos, black cockatoos, eclectus parrots, lesser and king birds of paradise are common. Faun-breasted bowerbirds were seen along the ecotone, and bowers were found at the very edge of the forest.

Logistically, the Jimi Valley was difficult to work. Although we were kindly allowed very comfortable accommodations at the ranch house, the portable holding facilities for birds were adequate for holding specimens no longer than 48 hours. The rented vehicle upon which we relied was in continual use, transporting people and birds back to Baiyer River; therefore, much of the time, access to the net lines was only on foot. The lowlands are hot, humid and abundant with insects, making working



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conditions difficult and tiring. In fact, several of our group contracted an undiagnosed illness which incapacitated them for up to 72 hours. But the richness of the avifauna in this location, and the fact that pasture expansion will certainly occur over the next five years, makes this area a prime collecting site for concentrated efforts in the future. Actual collecting time in the Jimi Valley was only eight days.

Summary

Delays in the planned itinerary, difficulties encountered in the field, and collection of only a few desired species for captive breeding programs precluded a bird shipment from PNG to the U.S. in 1985. The division of collected specimens among four institutions and the cost of air shipment and quarantine was simply not feasible. Those specimens which were desirable, however, for later shipment were being maintained at Baiyer River Sanctuary. These included king bird of paradise, white-eared catbird, sickle-crested bird of paradise, and several species of honeyeater. Three large cartons of plant material (especially orchids) were shipped and arrived safely in the U.S. for propagation and later distribution.

At Baiyer River Sanctuary, construction continued on the shade house to be used for the propagation and care of tropical plants. The superstructure to support shade cloth and benches was erected, set in cement, and prepared for installation of shade cloth (provided by ZSSD horticulture department). Depending on availability of staff labor at Baiyer River, this facility may be operational by late 1986.

The 1986 Collecting Trip

Again, four zoos, Los Angeles, Zoological Society of San Diego (ZSSD), Miami and New York Zoological Society participated in the expedition. A total of 14 personnel participated between July 20 and August 30; the length of stay varied from two to six weeks. Two collecting camps were concurrently established at Mt. Giluwe and at Jimi Valley. Baiyer River Sanctuary again was used as a holding site for birds collected, but due to tribal unrest in the area, a minimum number of personnel were kept at the sanctuary. The Jimi Valley camp was established on July 27, 1986, using personnel and gear from Exploration PNG and two cattle

ranch personnel. The Mt. Giluwe camp was established a few kilometers from the 1985 site at a logging mill site, again outfitted by Exploration PNG.

The Jimi Valley site was set up at Ruti, adjacent to an old log house on a hill overlooking the valley. Jim and Flossy Gentle were extremely gracious to the collecting team, allowing us to invade their ranch house shower every few days, and gave us the use of a Honda generator and cooler. Two net runs were established, one in the forest at the 1985 site, which is in the process of being logged out, and the other nearby, between a grassland and the national park. King birds of paradise, fruit doves and king fishers were the most abundant catches, with the lesser bird of paradise staying more elusive. A total of 40 birds of paradise, fruit doves and king fishers were collected and sent to Baiyer River. During the stay, the local villagers brought a white cuscus and a nine-foot amethystine python which were taken to Baiyer River.

It was evident that the cutting of mature forest trees is detrimental to the survival of birds of paradise and associated avian fauna, as evidenced by the number of birds collected in different years.

On the southern slopes of Mt. Giluwe, about 3 kil. (2 miles) from the 1984 collecting site, the high mountain camp was established. The camp was constructed on top of a sawdust pile where selected logging had occurred in 1984. The area appeared the most promising of several sites considered, having low trees adjacent to the road and numerous sightings of ribbon tail and brown sickle-bill birds of paradise. The site proved effective for lorries, including yellow-bill, whiskered, goldie, dusky and Papuan. Belford and smokey-bare-eyed honeyeaters were numerous in the area along with the sought-after birds of paradise. The total of ten birds of paradise, collected in three weeks of trapping, consisted of King of Saxony, brown sickle-bill, multi-crested and ribbon-tailed bird of paradise. Good numbers of both honeyeaters were collected so these species can be established in the United States.

Herpafauna

The diverse and interesting species of Papua New Guinea reptiles and amphibians range from some giants of the herpafauna world (23-foot salt water crocodiles, 27-foot amethystine

pythons, and the white-lipped treefrog — the world's largest treefrog), to the numerous small skinks and grassfrogs.

Of special interest is the Boelen's python, possibly one of the rarest snakes in the world. It is only found in upper elevation forests (up to 10,000 ft.) and its distribution appears to be very spotty. It is the only snake protected by the government in PNG and nothing is known of its habits.

A beautiful, common python is the green tree python. Invisible in the trees, it is occasionally found at night foraging on the ground. As a juvenile it is bright yellow or brick red and at approximately six months of age it becomes the green color of an adult.

There is a lot of work still to be done on the reptiles and amphibians of New Guinea. This work should be continued in future expeditions and can be an important phase of the trip.

After the collecting phase was completed, crates had to be built, birds cared for and readied for shipment along with export permits secured from the wildlife office. Birds of paradise are extremely protected and a symbol of national pride. After collecting these birds (consideration was given to the numbers and species to be exported), negotiations were completed with Karl Kisokau, Director/Conservation of Fauna, Office of Environment and Conservation and his assistant, Iamo Ila. Through their support and concern for the birds of paradise, both wild and captive, the permits were granted and the shipment allowed to be exported. The propagation of the birds in American zoos, the knowledge gained through behavioral aspects and public education about Papua New Guinea were the reasons these beautiful birds are allowed to be exported.

Catching, caring, crating and shipping gives one a true sense of pride and accomplishment. As the plane taxied out, my thoughts reflected on the past three years with mixed emotions; of hard work in primitive conditions but, overwhelmingly, a sense of teamwork and individual efforts from everyone involved. I saw people reach within themselves for that extra bit of energy or endurance that is so needed while collecting in tropical jungles. The American Zoo Papua New Guinea Consortium membership consists of zoological gardens, but the success has been measured by the individual participants and the true

spirit in working as one. Future prospects for continuation of the project are good but each year brings new challenges. Negotiations are already under way with logistical priorities, summary reports and 1987 proposals being written and reviewed. The ambassadors we collected and salvaged will represent the consortium well, displaying to the American public the beauty and diversity, until now, known only to the island environment of Papua New Guinea.

Participants of the Papua New Guinea Consortium

Arthur Risser, Jr., Ron Garrison, Mike Bostwick, Jim Gibbons, Carole Towne, Danny Simpson, Mark Huston, Dave Rimlinger, Emery Rhodes, Lynn Miller, Don Martin, Lance Birk, Ron Johnson, Kim Livingstone, Kathy Cunningham, Mike Cunningham, Ross Smith, Charles Pickett, Donald Bruning, Gus Waltz, John Kiseda, Eric Edler, Edward Schmitt, Larry Shelton, Greg Toffic, John Walters, Alan Reynolds, Greg Thompson, Ron Parrish, Al Valenzuela.

Special appreciation to Ross Smith and Don Bruning who helped in the preparation of this paper, along with Jim and Flossie Gentle who allowed the consortium staff to invade the ranch and use of their facilities. ●

Comments From Summary List of Birds

1. One male, about three months old with unusual skin condition (scabes?) taken to Baiyer River Sanctuary from Jimi River Cattle Co. (belonged to one of the ranch hands).
2. Common at Sir Donald Cleland Park, Madang
3. Commonly seen over bunai grass of Jimi Valley
4. Encountered along road to Baiyer River from Mt. Hagen
5. Observed in forest interior, lowlands of Jimi Valley
6. Seen in flight over forest or forest edge, Jimi Valley
7. Commonly observed in various areas throughout PNG during July-August
8. Observed around Gossam Island, and/or along coast at Madang
9. Other species of this genus also netted and released
10. Observed at Varirata National Park near Port Moresby
11. Observed in disturbed forest areas on southern slopes Mt. Giluwe at about 8,000 ft.
12. Observed at forest/pasture ecotone, Jimi Valley

Summary List of Birds Collected or Observed By American Zoo Consortium During 1985 Field Work in Papua New Guinea*

Scientific (Common) Name	Netted at Mt. Giluwe site	Netted at Jimi Valley site	Comment Number
Casuarus bennetti (Dwarf cassowary)			2
Phalacrocorax sulcirostris (Little black cormorant)			2
P. melanoleucos (Little pied cormorant)			2
Notophoxyx picta (Pied heron)			2
Milvus migrans (Black kite)			3
Accipiter cirrhocephalus (Australian sparrow hawk)			3
Rallus philippensis (Banded land rail)			4
Irediparra gallinacea (Jacana)			2
Ptilinopus pulchellus (Beautiful fruit dove)			5
Chalcophaps stephani (Stephen's ground dove)		X	
Psittoteles goldiei (Goldie's lorikeet)	X		
Neopsittacus musschenbroekii (Yellow-billed mountain lory)	X		
Micropsitta pusio (Buffy-faced pygmy parrot)		X	
Probosciger aterrimus (Palm cockatoo)			6
Cacatua galerita (White cockatoo)			6
Eclectus roratus (Red-sided eclectus parrot)			6
Tyto tenbriosa (Sooty owl)	X		
Aegotheles albertisii (Mt. Owllet-nightjar)	X		
A. insignis (Large Owllet-nightjar)	X		
Collocalia esculenta (Glossy swiftlet)	X		
Ceyx lepidus (Dwarf kingfisher)		X	
Halcyon torotoro (Lesser yellow-billed kingfisher)		X	
H. sancta (Sacred kingfisher)			7
H. saurophaga (White-headed kingfisher)			8
Tanyptera galatea (Common paradise kingfisher)		X	
Merops ornatus (Rainbow bee-eater)			3
Eurystomus orientalis (Broad-billed roller)			3,6
Aceros plicatus (Papuan hornbill)			6
Pitta erythrogaster (Blue-breasted pitta)		X	
P. sordida (Black-headed pitta)		X	
Crateroscelis murina (Lowland mouse-babbler)		X	
C. robusta (Mountain mouse-babbler)	X		
Eupetes caeruleus (Lowland eupetes)		X	
Ifrita kowaldi (Blue-capped babbler)	X		
Sericornis nouhuysi (Large mountain sericornis)	X		9
Rhipidura brachyrhyncha (Dimorphic rufous fantail)	X		9
R. albolimbata (Friendly fantail)	X		
R. leucophrys (Willie wagtail)		X	
Monarcha madanensis (Black and white monarch flycatcher)		X	9
Arses telescopthalmus (Frilled flycatcher)		X	
Machairrhynchus nigripictus (Black-breasted flatbill flycatcher)		X	
Microeca papuana (Papuan microeca flycatcher)	X		
Poecilodryas hypoleuca (Black and white flycatcher)		X	
P. albonotata (Black-throated flycatcher)	X		
Peneothello sigillatus (White-winged thicket flycatcher)	X		
Pachycephala schlegelii (Schlegel's whistler)	X		9
P. rufinucha (Rufous-napped whistler)	X		
Myiolestes megarhynchus (Brown shrike-flycatcher)		X	
Pitohui ferrugineus (Rusty pitohui)		X	
Eulacestoma nigropectus (Wattled shrike-tit)	X		
Aplonis metallica (Metallic starling)			8
Mino dumonti (Yellow-faced myna)			10
Gymnocorvus tristis (Grey crow)			6,8
Astrapia mayeri (Ribbon-tailed astrapia)			11
A. stephaniae (Princess Stephani astrapia)			11
Cicinnurus regius (King bird of paradise)		X	
Paradisaea minor (Lesser bird of paradise)			4,5
Loria loriae (Loria's bird of paradise)	X		
Cnemophilus macgregorii (Multi-crested bird of paradise)	X		
Chlamydera cerviniventris (Fawn-breasted bowerbird)			12
Ailuroedus buccoides (White-eared catbird)		X	
Toxorhamphus novaeguineae (Yellow-bellied longbill)		X	
T. iliolophus (Grey-bellied longbill)		X	
Melipotres fumigatus (Common melipotres)	X		
Melidectes belfordi (Belford's melidectes)	X		
Ptiloprora perstriata (Black-backed streaked honeyeater)	X		
Melanochoris nigra (Black berrypecker)		X	
Erythrura trichora (Blue-faced parrot finch)	X		
Oreostruthus fuliginosus (Crimson-sided mountain finch)	X		

*Many of the species netted were simply documented and released; others were deposited in the aviaries at Baiyer River Sanctuary. Observational list is incomplete.