

Parrot-Watching with Four Kings
The Return to Indonesia
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In 2001, a few of us traveled to Seram and West Papua to attempt to form liaisons with local villagers such that trapping of parrots would be reduced in return for other sources of income (eco-tourism, agriculture) and/or capital improvements to the villages. The main parrots we saw were the Seram (Moluccan) cockatoo, the Triton cockatoo, Eclectus, and miscellaneous lories and lorikeets. In contrast, in November-December of 2002 while we returned to West Papua, Seram was replaced by Sumba (the only home of *C.citronocristata*—the Citron-crested cockatoo). In Papua, we decided to restrict our area to Raja Ampat, a group of 4 islands off the Northwest coast of West Papua (which, curiously, is referred to the Bird's Head). Since "Raja Ampat" means "the Four Kings", I suppose it could be said that we were travelling with royalty.

I was met at the Bali airport by Ceisar Riupassa and Naldo Sahubarua, our collaborators in Project Bird Watch and the Indonesian Parrot Project (www.indonesian-parrot-project.org) and the leaders of *Yayasan Wallacea* (the Wallacea Foundation) which works symbiotically with us. It is Ceisar who was responsible for most of the improvements in the villages described below. We flew then to Sorong in West Papua (formerly called Irian Jaya) –this was just one of 15 flights I took during this trip overall, and boarded longboats to reach the islands. Longboats are long, narrow boats made from wood almost like a hollow log, and powered by two outboard motors.

In Sorong, we met up with Kris Tindige, leader of Yayasan Papua Bird Club (Papua Bird Club Foundation), an experienced bird guide of 13 years who has worked with the likes of the Producer and crew of "Attenborough in Paradise" and Dana Gardner, illustrator for *GUIDE TO THE BIRDS OF WALLACEA* (among several books). Kris not only led us to the birds, but taught us much about the history of West Papua, a region of Indonesia seemingly of value to the Government for its vast resources. Our first stop was Yenwaupnor, a charming

village on Gam Island of about 350 people where Barbara Bailey and I had spent four days last year (“Glorious Gam: A Paradise for Parrots” : Companion Parrot Quarterly, Issue 57, page 74-75). The people there are wonderfully friendly. Project Bird Watch/The Indonesian Parrot Project had sponsored (and Yayasan Wallacea, our Indonesian colleagues carried out) the building of a modest hut in the middle of a clearing in the forest, thereby eliminating the need to trek from the village to the forest each day . I named this “*Rumah Teman*” (or ‘House of Friends’) to indicate the new bond between the villagers, the birds and us. The Head of the village would receive some payment from each guest staying there; some additional money would be placed into a fund for villagers; guides and porters would be paid additional fees. In addition, we are establishing programs there for agriculture and improved medical care (both already begun). The hope is that trapping would decrease in response to these improvements in personal income and quality of life of individual villagers.

At the *Rumah Teman*, we saw 6-8 Palm cockatoos (*Probosciger aterrimus* ; *goliath sp.* in West Papua) at different times flying close over the hut, their bright red cheek patches quite apparent. However, it was easy to miss them because (unlike the white cockatoos) they mostly flew silently. In contrast to the Tritons, they have impressively long wings compared to their body size. At one point, we saw four Palms on one tree: this seemed appropriate since, in West Papua, four Palm cockatoos would be colloquially ‘called “Raja Ampat”—the same name as the region (Raja Ampat). On the trip, we had a total of 24 sightings of Palms! Many Eclectus were again present but the Triton cockatoos were fewer in number than last year, perhaps due a 6-month long drought with virtually no rain at all for 3-4 months. One Red-cheeked parrot was seen but no Great-billed parrots, which seem to be becoming rarer in Indonesia (as suggested by their infrequency and high price in Jakarta marketplaces). Last year, we were able to get good views of the Red Bird of Paradise in their courtship display; this year we saw 6-8 but always solitary and quite far away.

I had a chance to interview a few of the younger (ex?-) trappers about the birds of Gam. The Palms prefer to eat fruits from the katapong (*Palaquium obavatum*), kedongdong (a species of *Canarium*) and

pandanus (the “screw pine”). In fact, in Batanta, they were predictably seen eating high in ketapong trees. They also eat figs. They occasionally come to, or near, ground to find and eat the very hard nuts; we even saw them in low trees at the shoreline. To open the nuts, they either use a corkscrew motion or, mysteriously, use a leak somehow to push into a nut to facilitate opening it!

Triton cockatoos (*C. galerita triton*) are only found in Papua and outlying islands, although they have been introduced elsewhere. The villagers feel that Triton cockatoos are very smart. They don't come to ground to forage or eat. They often eat fruit of the langsat (*Lansium domesticum*) or palm tree fruit, papaya, figs, corn, banana, and coconut. Their major predators are Brahminy kites (beautiful raptors of which we saw several), monitor lizards and snakes; palm cockatoos, in contrast, seem not to be prey to raptors. They never observe any form of feather disease in these cockatoos. They felt that that probably had only one clutch per year, consisting of a single year (it is hard to tell how accurate such observations are). They fly perhaps 2-4 km. a day (a figure very close to that given to us about the Seram cockatoo). They described their courtship behavior as spreading their wings, turning around noisily and beak wrestling.

They described Eclectus, in contrast as “stupid” because are so easy to catch, perhaps they sometimes come to ground to eat and do not always fly away. Their food was comprised of cassava, papaya, banana, corn, coconut and chilis, but no figs. Their clutches contain two eggs; sometimes, both eggs survive.

Much less information was available on the Great-Bill parrot; the villagers consider them now rare. They eat the kedondong, but not ketapong fruit and something sounding like “jambo ponte” (the spelling of local foods by the villagers was often a bit uncertain); also: banana, corn. They observed no unexplained deaths, unlike observed in captivity by members of the Tanygnathus Society. Their predators were raptors and perhaps monitor lizards. Interestingly, they do not roost on Gam but, instead, fly to a nearby island referred to as “Stone Island.”

After Gam, we visited the village of Wailebed on Batanta Island, with the obligate gifts of betel nuts and tobacco. (Betel nuts derive from

the *Areca catechi* or tropical palm tree. When mixed with lime, they turn the gums chronically bright. Acutely they cause mild euphoria and inebriation along with dizziness and flushing. These symptoms are due to the active ingredient arecholine, an acetylcholine-like substance).

We stayed in the home of the *kepala desa* (village chief); we tentatively arranged with him to convert this to a tourist hut similar to that on Gam. Although this "house" was in the town itself, it was only a relatively short and easy trek to see the 'Raja Kakatua' in their favorite ketapong tree. (They also eat kenari nuts). Sadly, several captive Tritons (and one *Eclectus*) were seen in the village itself. The *kepala desa* said that they were "pets" to bring them enjoyment, but it is likely that some were sold (since such cockatoos are seen at Jakarta marketplaces but are restricted to Papua). Indeed, one cockatoo allowed me to scratch him under the crest and wings, but others were less friendly. All were chained to a short, solitary perch for most or all of the day. The "friendly" cockatoo looked to me as if his right leg was turned in; on inspection, it was clear that his leg chain was constricting the blood supply, causing edema and discomfort. We convinced them to switch legs for the band, and loosen it, and the next day, our friend seemed better.

We did see Triton cockatoos, but mostly in limited numbers due to the prolonged drought. However, after the first rain, we treated to the spectacle of 30 to 50 Tritons flying together, highlighted by the green of the forest. The cockatoos frequently were undisturbed while nesting, but occasionally a noisy mob of *Eclectus* would team up to take over the nest hole.

Other birds seen on Gam or Batanta were: the spectacular Western crowned pigeon (almost identical to the Victoria crowned pigeon except for a modest difference in their crests; seen on Gam only); imperial pigeons; fruit doves; spice imperial pigeons; paradise kingfishers; friarbirds; Moluccan and black-capped lorries; rainbow lorikeets; Blyth's hornbills; and sunbirds. A full list of the birds seen on our 10 days in Raja Ampat has been compiled by Kris Tindige. Also of interest were the pods of dolphins which swam alongside our longboats several times in the Salawati-Batanta (Sagawin) strait. Of interest (and pleasure) to me as a physician was making a difference

to one 'patient'. Just before leaving Batanta, I was called to the hut of Anton Dey, supposedly the trapper who first came to Raja Ampat. He was in severe pain, readily diagnosable as acute low back sprain; treatment rendered him much improved. Who says that house calls are things of the past!

From there, we visited Sumba, the last remaining stronghold of the Citron-crested cockatoo. In local terms, it is called "*Kakatua kecil Jambul kuning (jinga)*" or 'Little cockatoo with the yellow (Citron) Crest'. And the story there is worrisome. Recent data obtained by Drs. Jon Walker and Alexis Cahill of the Wildlife Conservation Society, and now being expanded by Dr. Pete Wood of BirdLife International and his team, indicate that in 1970, there were greater than 100 Citrons per 1000 hectares; in 1980, 13; in 1990, 3; and currently 2. This matches to some degree the drop in forest cover from about 55% in 1927 to 13% in 1996 and 8% in 2000. In addition, there is considerable, almost unregulated trapping of cockatoos; villagers even shoot them (and other birds) for target practice!

Fortunately, a plan is being formulated by BirdLife International to reduce trapping, increase local pride in the cockatoo, and increase tourism to Sumba. Our small group also has established working relationships with two *kepala desa* (and ex?-trappers) near the forest and hope to carry out plans similar to those we are setting up on West Papua. We also made up, and distributed, t-shirts with a wonderful color drawing (by Mrs. Joan Tilke) of the cockatoo with words "*Lindungilah Kakatua asli Sumba*" ('Save the Native Cockatoo of Sumba'), similar to those we made for Papua (with color drawings of Palm Cockatoo and the Wilson's Bird of Paradise on them). Ironically, there should already be a degree of historical pride in the cockatoo. A "Valley of the Cockatoos" (Wanukaka) is present in the Manu Rara Forest. Also, local Sumbanese mythology says that the cockatoo is almost a holy figure which transports the souls of the dead to heaven; cockatoos are often depicted in ikat, the traditional Sumbanese woven clothes. Furthermore, Sumba cockatoos serve a unique, and biologically important, function. Only the cockatoo drops the seeds of the mayela tree to the forest floor (these seeds are called "maha" on West Sumba and "mara" on East Sumba). The wood from this tree is considered sacred, to be used only for special ceremonial houses. Even loggers

will not cut down these trees. Sadly, despite all these reasons to conserve the cockatoo, the dollar (or in this case, the rupiah) seems to have taken precedence.

Some data are available on the diet of the Citron-crested cockatoo. They eat kananggar and and kayarak fruit (exact spelling uncertain) and showy flowers from 'Eretrina' and Dadap(species of *Erythrina*) ; berries from the hello-hello tree; fruit from the hello-hello tree; small durian fruits (*Durio* species) and the similar-appearing carara (spelling?) fruit; plus banana, coconuts, and corn. (The guides told us that the coconuts were large and that they didn't eat nuts, whereas Juniper and Parr, in PARROTS, suggest that, at least for some sulphur-crested cockatoos, small coconuts and nuts are eaten). They somehow avoid eating the poisonous fruit of the kajealo (?spelling).

No feather plucking was seen for Citrons in the wild; if there was any male-to-female aggression, it did not result in harm. This observation matches those I have been told for Salmon-crested and Australian cockatoos. The cockatoo's clutches were described as one per year, comprised of two eggs, of which both often survived. Their predators include monitor lizards, forest geckos, possibly snakes, and hornbills.

When we returned to Bali, we were met with the horrors of bird trapping at the Bali Bird Market. Hundreds of birds were present in small cages, mostly mynahs, doves, masked lovebirds, lorikeets, a few Moluccan red lories, and hordes of violet-necked lories—but no cockatoos. This was due only to the fact that recent police raids had driven the sale of cockatoos underground, to the personal homes of the traders, where a visit is by invitation only. We had, in fact, visited the richest trader in the Papuan town of Sorong. Despite the presence of Ceisar and Kris to translate, and the obvious squawking of a cockatoo inside his house, he denied trade in birds. This was doubtless not helped by the fact that I am an '*orang barat*' (westerner).

A major part of the decline in Indonesia's birds is the loss of habitat; about 70% of logging there is illegal (see review at our website). Recently, one of us (K.T.) met with Sitorus, a logger in Batanta to inform him that his temporary crews had been encouraging villagers to trap birds. He said that the trapping was mostly prompted by the middlemen, forestry and local security officials. He felt that if this

corruption could be stopped, the actions of his own workers would follow suit. This matches the findings of the Indonesian undercover investigative team KSBK (now called ProFauna Indonesia).

As before, the people of Indonesia were wonderful. Unfortunately, Bali is a ghost town for tourists after the bombing. This event is doubly tragic, in view of the peaceful nature of the Balinese people. Our efforts, small as they may be, to help the people and birds of Seram, Papua and Sumba will continue. Next year (hopefully), Part III: the return to Seram, the 'Mother Island' of the Moluccas , as well as these other homes for Indonesia's spectacular birds. COME JOIN US!