

## Notes on a guided PNG tour July 2012

*These notes were written after a guided birdwatching tour to Papua New Guinea in July 2012. This trip was run by one of the best world-wide birding tour companies and very little of what is written below could be considered to be their fault or even avoidable. It just seems that PNG is becoming a very difficult country to bird.*

*We always knew that there could be problems with infrastructure and flights but even so we found the continuous catalogue of difficulties depressing. We suffered the following problems:*

- cancelled flight to Mt Hagen resulting in nearly a day lost at Kumul
- problems getting fuel and then a broken engine on the Fly River resulting in the loss of most of one day in a key birdwatching locality
- no water for showers and barely edible food at Kwatu
- double booking of local guides/outfitters, who have a monopoly, so that we often had to wait for things to happen (e.g. they would be picking up the other group from the airport when supposed to taking us upriver) or manage without a guide (we often met the other group who had booked the same guide)
- elections in progress meaning that the countryside was very tense and we were unable to visit villages or see displays of costumes and headdresses
- lack of access to previous good birdwatching sites and deterioration of site quality

*But even all this would have been OK if we felt had seen good birds well – but we were disappointed in how hard the birds were to see and what distant and poor views we had. (Do not expect to see displaying Birds-or-paradise like on the TV!!) So with this in mind, here are the notes I wrote for the tour operator:*

I thought I would wait a while before writing this, to lend a more considered view to the PNG experience, but it hasn't changed much so here we go!

Having travelled all over the world for the last 30 years on all kinds of trips, starting off mainly with trekking and general wildlife tours then on birding trips, with a lot of independent trips thrown in, and a world list of 4000, we can quite honestly say that this is the first trip which, had we known what it would be like, we would not have booked.

**The main problem for us was the poor quality of the views of the birds. Yes, we got a good long list – 221 lifers – so on paper it looks like a successful trip. But we don't have many memories of quality birding moments. And all this is compounded by the fact the trip was so expensive. In a nutshell, the PNG tour was a lot of hard work and a lot of money for rather little reward (unless you just want ticks), which meant it just was not an enjoyable experience. (We do like to enjoy our holidays as well as seeing lots of birds!)**

In all the comments which follow, there is no criticism at all of our guide. He worked his socks off for us. (And the others members of the group were mostly very pleasant people, so that was one aspect of the trip which was NOT a problem.)

I'm afraid that the rest of this is going to be long and depressing but here goes. Here are some specific points which I feel I need to make:

1) **Birding sites.** The small and fast reducing number of places available for birding had an effect on the number of species possible to see and also the enjoyment of the birding process. Most sites we went to twice if not 3 times which was a bit boring.

Examples of this “site reduction” were the mangroves where the LNG plant is now being built, the Lesser Bird of Paradise site where the road is now impassable, the Flame Bowerbird bower (not accessible due to tribal disputes) and the upper pipeline at Dablin Creek (not accessible due to “works”). And the sites themselves were deteriorating in quality – at Dablin Creek the forest had been felled and the road at Tari is now very busy with heavy lorries making it unpleasant and presumably also affecting the birding.

2) **Birds-of-paradise.** Our views of birds-of-paradise were frankly very disappointing. A typical view was a dull female in a heavily leaved tree in the half light! There were exceptions – the two *Astrapias* were seen well, also the Brown Sicklebill, Short-tailed Paradigalla and the King of Saxony (but only the latter in display). The Greaters were just so frustrating – displaying well on the first drizzly visit but impossible to see through steamed up optics and through the trees, and on the second visit they hardly displayed. The Raggianas were a huge disappointment, not displaying at all and very hard to see in the tall trees. I thought they were a dead cert.! Twelve-wired was in distant mist and only there for a short while (plus a distant juvenile). Black Sicklebill was very, very distant. Blue was distant and impossible to pick out any colour (it looked like a crow with a frill on the bottom to me!) and the Superbs were distant but in silhouette and as soon as the light improved they disappeared. For Magnificent and the two Parotias we only saw females. The Manucodes on distant twigs just looked like small crows. I did get a really good 3 second view of the King BOP, and it was close – probably the best of all for me.

For most of these sightings a telescope was essential, and very few of the birds were displaying, which was disappointing.

3) **Distant and poor views.** Views of birds were often very distant, against the light, in poor light and fleeting – often all four! We hardly ever saw a bird less than 20 metres away and often they were 100 metres (sometimes much more) and a scope view was essential if you have not-so-good eyesight. I did find identifying dull honeyeaters at 100 metres daunting.

The birds also did not hang around for very long – and indeed often just flew through. It seems to me that this was because we were trying to find true forest birds in clearings where they would not normally be – they either just flew over, or passed through quickly, perching on distant exposed branches and soon shooting off into the forest. Dablin Creek, Ok Menga and Boystown Road are examples of this. Of course, finding forest birds in forest is even more difficult – in any other country the answer would be a canopy tower or walkway. (From our own experience we know that forest birding is always difficult, but somehow in PNG it was particularly so)

Even outside the forest, the Salvadori’s Teal was a tiny dot on the water and the Grand Munia was an even tinier dot on the distant hillside!

Many of the birds were only seen in half-light and/or against the sky. Parrots fly from roosting to feeding areas in the early morning and many birds-of-paradise seem only to be active then so there is no solution to this, but it did mean that the first morning at Boystown Road resulted in very few tickable birds even though we had technically seen plenty.

In summary, I think I can count on the fingers of one hand (maybe two) the birds for which we had clear, well-lit and close-ish views – the sort of thing you can get in Australia and the UK. Perhaps that is why we were all so gob-smacked by the Wattled Ploughbill – it did fit all the above criteria and hence became bird-of-the-trip!

With hard work from our guide, and better weather, we eventually improved on most of our poor views but it was all a bit of a struggle.

4) **Hard birds.** Yes I know the notes say that birding in PNG is hard, but until you have been there you don't realise how hard! All the above comments about poor views contribute to this and of course all the calling out you have to do. I think we tried for the Chestnut-backed Jewel Babbler 15 times??? Even things like Robins and Whistlers have to be coaxed out, often not successfully. In a nutshell, most birds are either very distant or have to be called out.

Gardens and open spots such as the Ok Menga teal site disappointingly had very few birds – I spent two hours in the late afternoon in the garden at Ambua and saw only two sorts of Honeyeater, a Brahminy Kite and, bizarrely, a New Guinea Eagle.

In fact, I was generally surprised how few birds there were just “around”, without being called out. We came across very few flocks and Varirata seemed very quiet indeed. Only at PAU and in the sclerophyll woodlands outside Varirata did we come across reasonable numbers of birds – and of course both are not forest habitat.

Interesting that we had also assumed that “the birding is hard” meant that a lot of physical effort would be required and I was resigned to the fact that I would not be able to get to some of the difficult areas. What it actually means is that you need to be prepared to stand in one place for a very long time and spend long hours in the field.

5) **Scope.** A scope was absolutely essential and we'd have brought ours if we had known. We were very lucky that David had a scope and was very good at finding birds. If all 9 of us had used one scope it would have been awful – more people would have missed birds. And a proper scope discipline was definitely needed.

6) **Price.** All the above would not have been so bad if we had not been paying so much! We are absolutely not the sort of people who carry on all the time about being ripped-off but in this case we would have had good reason!

The behaviour of the local operators – taking large sums of money then double-booking - was unscrupulous and dishonest. The service they provided was poor and the sums of money involved are huge by average PNG income standards. I really do not think that birding tour operators should condone this behaviour by carrying on using them. If this means not running trips to PNG, and clearly stating why not, then so be it. (The current situation leaves clients with a bad taste – nobody like being taken for a ride).

Some of the accommodation was ludicrously overpriced – enough has been said about the Holiday Inn, but according to an article in Wanderlust (a UK travel magazine) Ambua Lodge is £375 per night. This might be excusable if it was a luxury lodge but it wasn't – it was just quite nice. The cabins were nice, food good, but service was poor (luggage not collected, problems with drinking water) and there were no luxury touches. At Kumul we had ferns on the dining table and flowers in the room, at Cloudlands we had a flower decoration on the fresh towels – all the sort of touches completely missing from Ambua.

According to the same article Kumul, which is community run, is only £50 – what a bargain!

7) **The road trip.** The road transfer from Mt Hagen to Tari was, for us, a really interesting part of the trip, giving us a chance to see the countryside, farming and scenery, and I would definitely recommend keeping it in. I could not have stood the stress of two more flights (or non-flights). However, comfort stops do need to be made, every two hours would be good, both for bladder reasons and to help people who get very stiff sitting for long periods. The clientele of these trips tend to be aging after all!

8) **Kwatu.** I would seriously recommend 2 nights at Kwatu. With only one night at Kwatu you actually need all the time there is available on the two days to find all the birds. This leaves you very much at risk from variables such as cancelled flights to Kiunga and bad weather which would impinge on that birding time. As indeed occurred with our engine breakdown and “problem getting fuel”, which meant we were struggling to get all the birds in the short time we had left.

Would there be any reason why you could not take extra food? – either explicitly or under cover – even some packets of biscuits would have helped. There were plenty of supermarkets in Kiunga. And if the showers aren’t working (no rain?) then surely they ought to be able to supply a bowl of water?

Note that on the return trip on the boat we were in the boat for 5 hours – some kind of comfort stop should really have been built into this journey.

9) **Hours in the field.** I did not realise it at the time but getting up at 4:30 or 5, out in the field by 6, birding all day, back at 6, dinner at 7, bed at 8:30 every day, did actually take its toll on all of us, including the guide. Because there was no really hot period in the middle of the day we were not forced to stop birding, and while there were still species to see the temptation was to just carry on. We did get a few breaks of an hour here and there which were very welcome.

10) **Just birding.** Because of the lack of mammals and our failure to access any cultural facilities, the trip was rather one-dimensional. We are not “tunnel vision” birders so I think we missed this broader aspect. We all really enjoyed our visit to the village to see the Sooty Owl, and not just because there were some pretty good birds there, but because of the chance to see the agriculture and interact with the locals.

11) **Other things.** There were a number of other problems on this trip which just fall into the “expect the unexpected” category – nothing can really be done about them. Such as:

Very long hot wait for visas on entry which are into our time at PAU.

The much anticipated highlight – the Fly/Elevala river trip - was blighted by problems  
Cancelled flight to Mt Hagen (I wonder if early morning flights have a better chance of not being cancelled? Trouble is, it conflicts with good birding time)

No water at the hotel loo stop (might sound trivial but it wasn’t at the time!)

Elections causing tension and problems everywhere

No chance to see any headdresses etc at Tari

Remembrance Day meaning g museums closed in Port Moresby

In retrospect, and speaking to other people at Tari airport, we were lucky to get into Tari to catch our plane out so perhaps we should be grateful for small mercies! And really I think we were probably quite lucky with the weather.

12) **Trails.** Note that I have not mentioned any problems with the trails at Tari – that is because they were exactly like I expected them to be (Although some other clients

thought they were difficult) They were only really short access paths and not trails, so although they were often slippery with lots of fallen trees we did not walk very far on them. This was a bit unexpected as we thought we'd be doing more trail walking (as opposed to standing) – we even spent time before the trip trying to get fit enough to tackle long hard trails!

13) **New Britain.** Almost none of the above comments apply to New Britain, which was different in almost every way to the PNG mainland. No tension or angry faces, birds which were easy to see (well, most of them) and much closer, breaks at lunchtime, good boat trip, everything well organised etc. The only similarity is in the limited number of places to go birding. (We were unable to get into the highlands)

(Birding in New Britain was very comparable to Borneo – the birds were about the same distance away and the same mixture of easy and difficult)

If it hadn't been for the New Britain extension we would have come home with an even more downbeat opinion of the trip!

**To finish:** I have just been putting all the birds on my database and our grand total was 328 tickable species (plus quite a few heard only) including 221 lifers giving us a life list at present of 4201. This was actually quite impressive – I don't think there is anywhere else in the world we can go now where we can get so many new birds!

We were also pleased to pick up species we had missed on our previous Australia trips – Superb Fruit Dove, Little Bronze Cuckoo, Barred Cuckoo-shrike, Sooty Owl and Double-eyed Fig-parrot – and to see most of the species we would have seen if we had ever got to Cape York (shame about the White-faced Robin!)

When going through the birds for the list I was surprised in retrospect how dull-coloured many of them were. Many are just black or grey – think fantails, cuckoo shrikes, drongos, starlings, manucodes, melanpittas, paradigallas, fairy-wrens, coucals, various robins, Lorias' satinbird and Sanford's Bowerbird and there are black editions of each of myzomela, sunbird, monarch, butcherbird, sicklebill, berrypecker etc. If you are lucky there might be a rufous female, or a touch of rufous in the plumage! Only the parrots, pigeons, jewel babblers, peltops, kingfishers and a few birds of paradise were truly colourful. This is quite different from South American forest birds where the (relatively easily seen) hummingbirds, cotingas, trogons, toucans and tanagers are a feast for the eye, though the flycatchers are truly dull and the skulking "ant" species are in shades of black and rust, just like PNG. Maybe I am just unreasonable in hoping for good views of attractive birds!!

In fact I suspect that despite the size of our life list we are not true hard-core birders and maybe this trip was not really suitable for us. The list is **not** everything to us. Looking back we enjoyed our previous few weeks in the Northern Territories more than PNG, though we only saw 16 lifers, because we could do our own thing, the light was good, the scenery fantastic and the sense of achievement when you find your own cracking male Rufous-crowned Emu-wren dazzling in the morning sunshine is huge. We only booked a guided group birding tour for PNG as that is really the only way of doing it, so please take some of the comments above with this in mind.