

Where to See Birds

AN EASTERN HIGHLAND'S FLING



Nature tourism, a much needed incentive for conservation, is suffering from Papua New Guinea's bad press. Be bold, a superb birding location beckons...

HEROWANA VILLAGE IS scarcely visible through the mist as our pilot circles the light plane to get a glimpse through the cloud and good view of the airstrip. The scene is breathtaking: the rugged Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea rise above the tree line and cascade down to fast-flowing rivers and deep canyons at the northern edge of the Crater Mountain Wildlife Management Area. Here the Gimi people have built their villages on small sections of flat land perched on the mountain sides, walked barefoot the steep, muddy trails to the river flats to cultivate crops, and performed elaborate dances for as many generations as anyone can recall. And here, perched on the loftiest branches,

Ragianna Birds of Paradise trumpet their presence across the mysterious green of the rainforest drapery.

As first time visitors to Papua New Guinea, we have come to Herowana on holiday, but with a view to assessing the area for python research. Herowana is within the Crater Mountain Wildlife Management Area (CMWMA). Gazetted in 1993, the CMWMA is 2600 sq. km of rainforest, 150–3,118 m in elevation. Covering such a large, diverse area, it harbours more than 80 mammal and 280 bird species. Among them are iconic New Guinean species such as Ragianna Bird of Paradise, Dwarf Cassowary and hornbills, and globally threatened species such as New Guinea Harpy Eagle, Vulturine Parrot, Yellow-breasted Bird of Paradise and Blue Bird of Paradise. To conserve their forests and provide long-term alternatives to industrial logging and mining, the Gimi and Pawaian owners joined forces with the Wildlife Conservation Society, and the Research and Conservation Foundation of Papua New Guinea. Locally owned and operated enterprises have been established to provide lodging, guiding and research assistant services to visiting scientists and nature enthusiasts.

After a hearty welcome at the airstrip we were settled in to a traditionally constructed guest-house, introduced to our research assistants and guides, and were soon busy discussing the program for our visit. The pythons are mainly my husband Alastair's department, but I'm more than happy to tag along wherever there will be birdwatching opportunities. I was in for a real treat.

Early the next morning we were taken to see Ragianna Birds of Paradise. Entering a track immediately adjacent to the airstrip, we walked for

Blue Bird of Paradise, found in a narrow belt of lower montane forest. Photo by C. and D. Frith

Herowana guides mending a vine bridge. Photos by Alastair Freeman

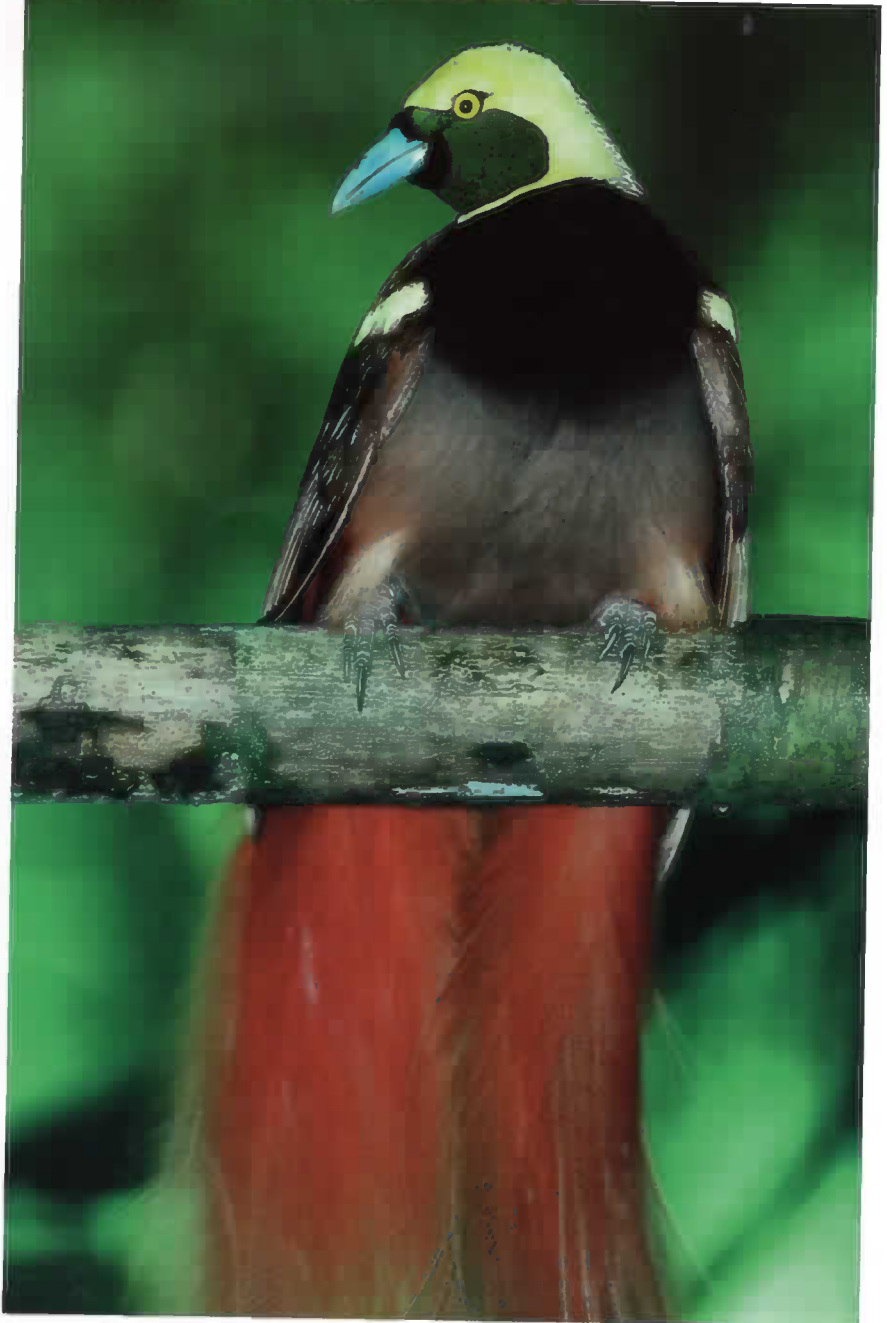
20 minutes in the half-light, through forest and old overgrown gardens, hearing the Raggiannas calling ahead of us. Suddenly, there they were: three males displaying up high on the exposed branches of an emergent tree. The early morning sun caught the brilliant emerald green of their throat feathers as they spread luxurious, orange plumes showily in attempts to impress several females nearby. Familiarised with their call, we were able to witness several more displays over the course of our visit.

The next day we trekked north to an area where pythons had been reported. We meandered through the hamlets that make up Herowana, along the high terraces of the Fio River, then up a steep climb to a ridge northwest of the village. As we climbed, lush forest gradually gave way to stunted vegetation and the thick moss underfoot became increasingly spongy. We came across three bowers belonging to Macgregor's Bowerbirds. The orange-crested males build elaborate maypole bowers of small twigs around a slim sapling with a circular mossy base, reminiscent of a green tyre laid on the forest floor. These artful decorators were seen on the edge of our camp where, tired from the strenuous walk, we spent the night in an elaborate bush hut constructed from local bush materials by our guides and carriers.

I was up early to look for birds further along the ridge line, which proved to offer spectacular views in daylight. Black Sicklebills called from a tree clinging to the ridge top, their tremendously long, lanceolate tail feathers visible before any other part of the bird.



Clockwise from top left:
 Highland forest view.
 Photo by Alastair Freeman
 Adult male Raggianna
 Bird of Paradise, common
 in disturbed habitats.
 Photo by C. and D. Frith
 Bush hut. Photo by
 Alastair Freeman





A pair of Brehm's Tiger-Parrots had me reaching for my field guide as I tried to distinguish between the various subspecies. Several fantails, including Black Fantail and Friendly Fantail, equally challenging to identify for a first-timer, also bemused me for a while. For every species we have in Australia, it seemed that Papua New Guinea had 10 or 20. Though our guides knew the birds well and would have been happy to accompany me, I enjoyed trying to identify birds by myself (even if my final tally totalled less than it would have with local guidance). This was one of the best things about Crater—help available when needed, but also the joy of exploring alone.

Our next trek took us south of Herowana and across a vine swing-bridge spanning the deep chasm of the Fio River. After a couple of hours we reached a bush hut in an old garden site overlooking a stream with lush forest beyond. The bird life was prolific. We watched a Mountain Peltops sallying back and forth, and added White-faced Robin, Great Cuckoo-Dove, Scrub White-eared Meliphaga, Dwarf Whistler and Yellow-faced Mynah, among others, to our list. Then came the highlight of our trip. Our guides took us to see the dance ground of a Magnificent Bird of Paradise, close to the camp. In no time at all they constructed a little hide of palm fronds, complete with seat, from which I could see the performance. For the next two mornings, I watched from my leafy screen as the golden-backed male clacked his wings and danced his highland fling for passing females.

As well as experiencing the natural attractions of the area, visitors can experience a little of highland life. The locals stop to chat and you get a glimpse of a different way of life. There are village markets to visit, offering fresh foods and artefacts, including the exquisite string bags called bilums, made entirely from natural fibres.

Visiting CMWMA

We were based at Herowana village, but there are other options within the CMWMA and preference will depend on what one wants to do and see.

Three villages offer guesthouses that provide basic accommodation for very modest fees. Visitors to the area can enjoy treks to such features as bat caves, Bird of Paradise display sites, waterfalls and vine suspension bridges over cascading water torrents.

Unfortunately, perceptions that Papua New Guinea is not a safe place to visit have caused a decline in tourism. But, don't let the reputation of the highland towns put you off visiting the CMWMA. While it is always wise to take precautions in the towns, we did not experience any difficulties, and at CMWMA we felt completely at ease. Revenue from tourism and research goes back into the communities, helping to sustain self-sufficiency within the villages and provide better health care and education. Birdwatchers visiting the CMWMA will have a tremendous, modestly priced highlands experience and their visit will help provide the Gimi and Pawaians with needed income and incentive to continue acting as stewards of their rainforest.

Readers interested in visiting the Crater Mountain Wildlife Management Area are advised to consult the Research and Conservation Foundation of Papua New Guinea website at www.rcf.org.pg

by AMANDA FREEMAN,
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Clockwise from top left:

The Dwarf Cassowary reaches a height of just over metre. Photo by C. and D. Frith

Local dancers—note the cassowary feathers in the headdresses. Photo by Alastair Freeman

Hamlet at Herowana. Photo by Alastair Freeman