

PNG SOLO – KUMUL LODGE AND VARIRATA N.P. IN 2009

by Petri Hottola



Fig. 1. Yes, I do have a crest...see! **Crested Bird-of-Paradise** at Kumul Lodge, shot by a Lumix pocket camera.

INTRODUCTION

Papua-New Guinea is among the bird tourism destinations which people rarely visit by themselves, but rather join a package tour group. The island is apparently considered to be both an organizing challenge and a security risk. Nevertheless, teenage backpackers from Europe regularly travel there by themselves and survive their journeys. Therefore, there should really be no reason to believe that relatively seasoned birding travelers could not do the same and arrange their PNG tour by themselves. My visit in January 2009, 6th - 16th, proved the validity of this estimation. With some planning and common sense, one is not likely to encounter any serious problems. It is not going to be cheap, as tourism services on the island are overpriced, the demand exceeding the supply and the infrastructure being unreliable, but the self-made visit can be less expensive than with a tour group, especially if one has company. Unfortunately, there are no budget flights from Europe to Papua-New Guinea, unless you visit the island as a part of an around-the-world tour, as I did.

In the nine and half days, I scored with 204 bird species and a handful of mammals. The report is not going to list all of them, even though many will be mentioned. There are quite accurate species lists available in the Internet, at least for the Kumul Lodge sites and perhaps also for the Varirata National Park. My main focus is on significant species and on the ones not yet included in the annually developing site lists. Some bird species are also highly seasonal, the time of my visit being the low and cold season, when tours do not normally visit the PNG, and when several species do their wanderings down to lower altitudes, or up in search of seasonal food resources. This is a good time to visit the island solo, because there are plenty of vacant rooms in the highland lodges. Port Moresby, however, is fully booked year-around, at least in regard to affordable lodgings.

In the beginning, I spent six days at Kumul Lodge, making trips to the surrounding region and checking out the birds of the Mt. Hagen airfield on departure. One night was spent in Port Moresby, with some morning garden birding along the Lahara Avenue in Boroko, before venturing to Varirata National Park for three and half days. Pacific Adventist University grounds were visited on the way up. At Kumul Lodge I relied on lodge transportation and (once) public bus. Afterwards, I was more self-sufficient with a rental car. Overall, the results of the PNG trip were better than I had expected. There were minor delays with transportation and some problems with access on the mountains, but this could be expected.

Security-wise, no really threatening situations were encountered. In Mt. Hagen, we were stopped by fifty villagers with machetes on the highland highway. They demanded money for road reparations (they had filled two potholes with gravel) but immediately gave up when confronted by the authority of the Kumul Lodge people, with whom I traveled. In another occasion along the same highway, a truck with 5000 bottles of Coke and Fanta had fallen off the road. People gathered from the surrounding villages to pillage the load, but it was a joyful occasion. The driver and police accepted the situation. After a polite hint of being thirsty, I was immediately given a drink by a local girl. All in all, the people of the PNG were polite, warm and welcoming, with one or two exceptions among the hundreds I met there, even though I myself was oftentimes less than friendly, being driven by an obsession on birds rather than people.

K refers to Papua-New Guinea kina, the local currency. In January 2009 one Kina was the equivalent of 0,27 euros. The taxonomy follows, with few exceptions, the Birds of New Guinea 1986 edition (Beehler, Pratt and Zimmerman).

BASIC NECESSITIES

Accommodation

Traveling solo, one needs to look for budget accommodation deals. In the PNG, they are not always easy to find - a special effort is required. First of all, contacting the accommodation providers is difficult. Many of them do not have an email address. Some of the ones which have will not reply your requests. Second, there are mostly up-market (well, mainly their price) establishments, with exceptionally high daily room rates, equivalent of a one week rent in some other parts of Asia. Third, everything tends to be fully booked in Port Moresby, where demand is clearly higher than supply. Apparently business is precarious in the PNG because of its banking and crime problems, and not many entrepreneurs are ready to risk it, even though it is an underdeveloped market. Therefore, book as early as you can. More detailed comments on the places where I stayed (Kumul Lodge in Mt. Hagen, Mapang Missionary Home in Port Moresby and Bluff Inn Motel on the Sogeri Road) will follow.

Money

Cash PNG Kinas were available at the ANZ Bank of Cairns International Airport. Not sure if currency exchange was available on arrival at the Port Moresby International, I changed a few notes. That would not have been necessary as the airport exchanges were open also on Sunday, with rates superior to those at Cairns. The ANZ commission (fee + rate difference) was around 30%, a highway robbery. At the PNG banks, they took one third of that. One needs cash kinas for the PNG visa (K80) on arrival, but the money may be obtained before the payment. The airport exchange service proved so secure and efficient that I changed all my cash there, between domestic and international flights, and when picking my rental car up. No need to look for downtown banks.

Car Rental

Once again, my choice happened to be Budget. They had a 4x4 available, whereas the other companies had already sold their ones out, in October 2008 (book early!). With one exception, I was quite happy with the Budget services. The car reservation and negotiations by email went well before arrival in Port Moresby. I was upgraded to a brand new Mitsubishi Overlander, which proved to be ideal for the Varirata excursion. The car had a special emergency phone and tank large enough to allow three days of maneuvers, before filling it up again on return in Port Moresby (closest station was quite far away from the airport, in Boroko). There is no petrol available along the Sogeri Road, on the way to the national park.

The only problem with Budget Port Moresby was their slow service at the airport. The one airport representative was always at the domestic terminal and took her time to arrive at the international one, despite the fact that I had arrived at the right counter at the agreed time. Both at pick up and return I lost one hour waiting for her to make the 100 meters. Because of security checks, it was not a good idea for me to walk to the other side. After arrival, she did her job very well. The total petrol costs for the Varirata trip were K97.

Most car rental agencies insist on 4x4s out of the town. In the case of Sogeri Road, this is complete nonsense. The tarmac is fine all way the up to the Varirata National Park. Only after the entrance gate, there is one rough spot one may want to avoid, just before picnic grounds (it is possible to by-pass this, along a short alternative track, against one way traffic). If you take the advice of the local expats or read the Australian newspapers, driving to Sogeri (or in Port Moresby) may soon sound like a suicide mission. Do not let them put you off. Go for it! These places may be risky for foreigners in the long run, but a short-time visitor is unlikely to meet any trouble if one keeps security in mind and acts more or less sensibly. Think twice before making yourself vulnerable out of the relative security zones, such as the Varirata N.P. I bought bananas and biscuits at roadside stalls, observed the sunset bird movements, drove on the roads after dark (with caution) and talked with the locals, if they approached me. On the other hand, I always had a big knife at hand...



Fig. 2. Budget Mitsubishi Overlander, with an emergency phone antenna on its bonnet.

Domestic flights

PNG does not have a comprehensive national highways network connecting all of its provinces with one another. Also the capital, Port Moresby, is essentially an isolated island within the island, both geographically and politically. The mountain terrain is difficult for road construction and airplanes have consequently taken a leading role in inter-island transportation. There are several daily flights to main domestic destinations but smaller settlements are served on a less frequent basis, also depending on

weather. Delays are the rule, not an exception. It is therefore a good idea to 'get in' as soon as possible and reserve some extra time for the return, to minimize the risk of missing one's international departure. The Air Niugini domestic flights are safe and relatively inexpensive, and both the reservations and payments can conveniently be done in the Internet. I got my tickets well before the arrival in Papua-New Guinea.

The connection between my international arrival and the domestic flight to Mt. Hagen proved, however, to be stressful. The stress was caused by JetStar, a no-frills Australian airline, which delayed its flights from Tokyo to Cairns by 24 hours, with no help for us customers in trouble with connections. They told me to call Finnair, in Finland, to ask for information on the next leg!! I arrived in Cairns one day late and had to struggle to get on the next flight to Port Moresby, on an Air Niugini 'wet-lease' Embraer 154. Had my domestic connection been to Tari, for example, the PNG visit would have been completely ruined, as Air Niugini flies there only twice a week. Fortunately, I was on my way to Mt. Hagen, with several daily connections. I emailed Kumul Lodge from Tokyo, informing them on the situation, and called them from Cairns, with an estimated arrival time. In Port Moresby, my 3G mobile phone did not work anymore.

In Cairns, JetStar informed me that Air Niugini will charge K110 for the change of domestic departures, on which JetStar of course had no responsibility, even though their delay had caused the situation. Fortunately, Air Niugini did not collect the fee. They also allowed me to carry 35 kg of luggage to Mt. Hagen. Originally, I had planned to leave half of my things at Mapang Missionary Home in Port Moresby, to meet the Niugini luggage weight limitation (max 16 kg on domestic flights). This way I learned that the rules are flexible in case a person has arrived in PNG on an international flight. Tourists are allowed to take heavy luggage on domestic flights, free of charge.



Fig. 3. Departure hall, Mt. Hagen airport.

I had no complaints on the flights themselves. It was interesting to sit on a Fokker jet when it landed to Mt. Hagen, flying rather fast and low in-between hills and making moves one seldom experiences in a commercial jet. The long waits at the rather basic, hot airport terminals were another matter. In Port Moresby, my flight was first delayed by three hours and then cancelled. I had to take the next flight. On arrival in Mt. Hagen, I found out the importance of keeping one's luggage tag. The bags were collected in a huge pile on the floor and everybody took their pick. At the exit door, the tags were checked before one could carry anything away. The manager of Kumul Lodge, Mrs. Kim Arut waited me at the arrivals and we continued straight to Kumul Lodge, in the waiting van driven by her son. She is well-organized and will reply your emails promptly at kumul-lodge@global.net.pg. Airport transfer was K70 one way.

KUMUL LODGE

Kumul Lodge is a community-based bird tourism venture, which has proved its viability during the 15 years of existence – a kind of project one loves to support. The lodge bird lists are at <http://www.pngholidays.com.au/bird-watching>. The staff has learned their English from the mouths of the customers and they have learned the language remarkably well. Bird guides have had no formal training, but become experts by example. The kitchen staff has learned what and how to cook for the international visitors, mastering the art of boiled vegetables, for example. Just the right degree of tenderness! The food is expensive by PNG standards (dinner K35, lunch K32, breakfast K30), but worth the money because of the quality, expensive ingredients and the size of the servings. No upset stomachs there, it is fresh and hygienic. Personally, I was not able to digest three big meals a day, but had just breakfast and one meal, either lunch or dinner. Biscuits and candy were brought from Finland to supplement the menu, not the mention Red Devil energy drink, a good way to smoothen the jet lag on the first days in a different time zone.



Fig. 4. A Kumul Lodge lunch with the perfect fresh vegetables.

Tour groups are usually accommodated in the slightly more modest Wing rooms (K140 per night). My reservation was also there, but I was upgraded to a 'bunk room' (K165), one of the separate three bed en suite bungalows with tea-making facilities. Electricity was available 24 hours a day - from a generator, if the general supply was discontinued. Hot water had to be requested separately, but it was available in a minute or two. At nights, the rooms can be a bit cold at the 2800 meters, but I had no problems, thanks to an electric blanket (in each bed) and a sleeping bag, which was used as an extra blanket. The lodge grounds are tastefully developed and there is some good forest right next to the lodge, with a view to Mt. Hagen and other mountains. All in all, it is a comfortable place to stay, so high on the mountains, clearly above the local comfort zone because of the low night temperatures.

The one problem with the Kumul Lodge worth knowing is the price of its trips to birding sites in the surrounding region. They have been calibrated for tour groups and end up being rather excessive for a single visitor. It is not the guides, who earn but a small salary, or the landowners, who receive a pittance commission, but the transportation which costs an arm and a leg. One should not be fooled by the lodge information (also in the Internet, on some pages) stating that for example Pigetes, one of the best sites, is "15 minutes" or "one kilometer" away from the lodge. It is 5 km steep downhill and more than one hour before you reach the start of the trail, and begin to climb the steep hills, wading first in water, along the narrow and slippery track! After the trail, it is 5 km steep uphill, or a lift in a local bus (1K one way), and it may well be raining. Well, you can rent their car and driver to Pigetes, paying hundreds of kinas. Then the driving time may be 15 minutes, one way. The Kumul management may already have corrected inaccurate information.



Fig. 5. Welcome to Kumul Lodge, the nature lovers' paradise in Papua-New Guinea!

Birding

Mt. Hagen Airport

This is a stake-out for **Papuan Harrier**, and I also scored with one. **Great Wood-Swallows** may also be seen, and especially along the road from Mt. Hagen the city to Mt. Hagen the mountain, and the Kumul Lodge.



Fig. 6. Air Niugini Fokker to Port Moresby, at Mt. Hagen air field.

Lodge Grounds

The lodge grounds and some of the forest trails below the accommodation units have enough bird species for about three days. I spent four days there, seeing only two new species on the third, and one on the fourth. At this height, birds became active already 5.30 AM and stayed active beyond sunset, around 6.30 PM. Later on, **Mountain Owlet-Nightjars** gave a reason for spotlighting. One or two were regularly calling just above the lodge, sometimes already at 8 PM, oftentimes much later. A single bird was seen twice in the trees and bushes by the bunk houses, just after the last one on the left. They are shy of spot-lights – be sensible with your torch.

The star bird of the lodge is a male **Crested Bird-of Paradise (Fig. 1)**, which frequented the back of the bunk house where I stayed in (the one on the back left), and the feeder observation platform, displaying against

its image on a window glass. More **CBPs** were seen at the Orchid Garden. Many of the bird species can best be seen at the lodge bird feeder (fresh fruit), by the main building. In January 2009, all four **Tiger-Parrot** species were present at Kumul Lodge, three of them at the feeder, together with **Brown Sicklebills**, **Ribbon-tailed Astrapias** and others. The feeder was also the only stake-out at Kumul Lodge for **Archbold's Bowerbird**, a single female-plumaged bird visiting the fruits through-out the day. A **Black-throated Honeyeater** was once seen close by. **Princess Stephanie's Astrapias**, listed for Kumul, are not normally seen by the lodge complex. I saw a party of six a bit (200 m?) lower in the Kumul forest and they are also found at Pigetes. Interestingly, the species lives higher than the **Ribbon-tail** on Mt. Wilhelm, to the east.



Fig. 7. Kumul Lodge feeder, with a female **Brown Sicklebill** and a male **Brehm's Tiger-Parrot**.

Belford's Melidictes is the most conspicuous bird species at the lodge, being present everywhere. **Lorikeets** can be seen in the taller trees around the lodge, or flying around in active, noisy flocks. At the time of my visit, they included **Papuan** (both forms), **Goldie's**, **Plum-faced**, **Yellow-billed** and **Orange-billed**, the second and last being the most numerous. **Mountain Swiftlets** were seen only early in the morning, high above the ridges, unlike the common low-flying **Glossy Swiftlets**. Scanning the sky also produced a lone **Long-tailed Buzzard**. Locating a good observation point was not easy; I borrowed one of the chairs of the dining area and sat in front of the kitchen, because that side of the building was more productive than the other one. **Mountain Firetails** were usually found at low grass behind the buildings, feeding on grass seeds, and **Crested Berrypeckers** in the bush by the bunk houses. A group of **Tit Berrypeckers** was recorded once.



Fig. 8. Mt. Hagen is located right next to the lodge. If interested, one may hike up there, to see **Alpine Pipits** and other over 3000 meter specialists.

The sheltered walkways and balconies allow birdwatching also during the occasional rain, as long as the birds remain active. The entrance walkway up to the lodge was the best place to observe some ground-dwelling species, such as **Mountain Mouse-Warbler**, **Papuan Scrub-Wren**, **Large Scrub-Wren**, **Buff-faced Scrub-Wren** and **White-winged Robin** (perhaps the nicest bird at Kumul), which also occurred in the general area on that side. **Blue-grey Robins** are not included in the lodge bird list, even though they occur at Pigetes, close by. I did, however, see one lower down behind the Orchid Garden and another about 200 meters down the slope towards Pigetes (there are steep downhill trails). Could this be a seasonal feature?

Both **Common** and **Western Smoky Honeyeaters** are present in the area, and one needs to be careful to identify these at first sight rather similar species.



Fig. 9. No need to get wet when walking between buildings at the Kumul Lodge.



Fig. 10. An adult male **Ribbon-tailed Astrapia**, one of the splendid **Birds-of-Paradise**.



Fig. 11. There are a few species of lizards at Kumul Lodge. I have no idea which species this is.

The level trail below the Wing rooms is worth a try. Early in last the morning I was lucky with a **Rufous Woodcock** there. The bird landed on the trail and run away as soon as it spotted me there. Many birds can be seen along the entrance road (especially in the beginning) from parking lot past Orchid Garden and down to the highway junction (gated, but the gate can be opened). According to the guides, **Black-billed Cuckoo-Doves** do not occur by the Kumul Lodge, but one nevertheless gave stunning views by the parking lot, with its barred tail and bright orange head. The Orchid Garden is a relatively peaceful place for birdwatching. There are many people on the lodge grounds and their interest in visitors may occasionally become slightly disturbing when one desires to focus only on birds, especially along the entrance road. In the garden, **Grey** and **Brown-chested Gerygones**, and **Fantail Berrypeckers**, were more easily seen than anywhere else. The **Grey Gerygones** sing high up the taller trees, being sometimes attacked by the huge (in comparison) **Belford's Melidictes**. I would not be surprised if the **Melidictes** hunted them for food!

There are four species of **Whistlers** at Kumul Lodge: **Regent** (also at Pigetes), **Rufous-naped** (very common), **Lorentz's** (seen only once) and **Brown-backed** (access road). In front of the Kumul highway junction, there is a large grassy area, with common and widespread species, including **Hooded Mannikins**, which were nevertheless surprising difficult to see. At the junction, the forest edge with small streams was also productive, with forest floor species and one of my two **Garnet Robins**. The species I missed at Kumul Lodge included **Forbes' Forest-Rail**, **Lesser Melampitta**, the very interesting **Wattled Ploughbill**, **Red-collared Myzomela** (absent in January) and **Sooty Melidictes**. The **Ploughbill** had apparently been seen somewhere on the forested slope towards Pigetes. The high altitude **Melidictes** was present some distance further on, towards Mt. Hagen, but I did not go up there, hoping to see the species in an easier to reach location.

Pigetes

The star species of Pigetes is the **King of Saxony Bird-of-Paradise**. The site has, however, many other bird species as well, and is undoubtedly the best birding location close to the Kumul Lodge. As already explained, the access is something else than the available information may lead one to believe. It would have been great to be on the trail early in the morning, but I was not ready to invest the requested sum for the short car ride, believing it actually was only a 15 minute walk to the trail entrance. Next time, I would take the guide with me and catch a bus both down and up, K2 each way! There are numerous buses driving up and down past the Kumul Lodge, on the highland highway, and they are not all full. The charge for a full day guided trip to Pigetes was K160, without transportation.

The 5 kilometer walk delayed us, but was not complete waste of time. Among the more common species, we saw a **Canary Flycatcher** (surprisingly rare), a **Black Sittella** and a party of **Blue-faced Parrot-Finches**. About 4 km downhill, we met the land-owner, who joined us into the forest, being most helpful in a number of difficult spots on the trail. At the former **KSBP** stakeout, low on the hillside, somebody had chased the adult male away, or perhaps killed it. The exquisite plumes are in great demand on the highlands, for male decorations. We saw a female bird there, but decided to venture further, even though that was a risky decision for me, a fat guy with a walking disability. The climb was not too long, and well worth the effort. Not only were we able to observe a male **King of Saxony Bird-of-Paradise** as long as we wished, but there were a good selection of other interesting species, too. These included, among others, a **Bronze-winged Ground-Dove**, **Rufous-throated Bronze-Cuckoos**, a **Spotted Jewel-Babbler** (only heard), a **Lesser Ground-Robin** (only heard), **Orange-Crowned Fairy-Wrens**, **Black-breasted Boatbills**, a **Lorentz's Whistler**, **Blue-capped Ifritas** and **Rufous-backed Honeyeaters**.

Kama (Khama)

This stake-out for the exquisite **Lesser Bird-of-Paradise** is at 1000 m level down towards Wabag. One needs to leave Kumul Lodge well before sunrise, by 5 AM, as it is a one-and-half hour drive to the site. In practice, the departure is likely to be delayed by somebody involved, the Papuans not being 100% committed to punctuality. At the end of the road which passes Pigetes and some other birding locations, a shelter and benches have been constructed in the right spot, on private land. It is therefore possible to observe birds even if it is raining. The locals are interested in the foreign visitors, and this may become little bit disturbing, even though they are polite and more or less understand the situation. There is basic accommodation available close by, for the adventurous.

Several **LBP**s were calling on arrival and eventually one immature male arrived in the trees next to the observation point, staying there for hours. The forested slopes in the background looked great and one could hear a number of interesting species: e.g. **Blue** and **Superb Birds-of-Paradise**. Apparently, there was no access to the forest proper, to my frustration. As far as I understood there was a trail somewhere in the area, but the conditions were said to be too difficult for me. Nevertheless, with my telescope I was lucky enough to spot a male **BBP** calling on top of a distant tree. Eventually, a female **SBP** visited the observation site, feeding in one of the bushes. Among the other birds present, the pretty **Ornate Melidictes** were the most memorable ones. This apparently is the best place to score with the species. Otherwise, **New Guinea White-eyes**, a **Mountain Red-headed Myzomela** (absent at Kumul Lodge) and others.



Fig. 12. Cultivated habitat at the Kama observation site.



Fig. 13. The river has Torrent Flycatchers at this site on the Wabag road.

The charge for the trip was a whopping K580, supposedly for a full day journey. In practice, we were back by noon. Great birds, but not altogether worth the money, unless one is able to share the transportation costs (the rate gets gradually higher as the number of customers increases), or rent a car at Mt. Hagen. Most of the time was spent at the **LBP** site, with stops on the return drive, at a river bridge and a stake-out for **Yellow-breasted Bowerbird**. The river had several **Torrent Flycatchers**, **Mimic Meliphagas** and other species moving around in the valley bush. We failed with the **YBB**, despite repeated attempts. This was said to be exceptional.

PORT MORESBY

Accommodation

Finding budget accommodation with peaceful surroundings can be a drag in Port Moresby. Luckily, I had been able to reserve a room at Mapang Missionary Home, for K140 for bed and breakfast (meals K15 and 22). New friends from the PNG Civil Aviation Authority gave a lift from the airport to the guesthouse. The other way round, I had a Red Dot airport taxi, which charged K30, K10 more than a regular one. The bedrooms of MMH are like in a hostel, but tidy and peaceful, and the meals were fine. The place is secure with guards and guard dogs; a necessity in a close proximity of no-go areas (e.g. 5 Mile).

An additional bonus is the company of various missionaries from different parts of the PNG, with their oftentimes interesting stories, even though one may not fully agree with their mission. Mrs. Jeannette Hagoort was quite helpful already before the visit, providing important pieces of information (email office@mapang.org.pg). Her husband, Wally, on the other hand, was cranky, appearing to dislike his job and the interaction with us guests. In the morning, I did some birding at the MMH yard, while waiting for the taxi. There were plenty of birds in the park-like suburbia, mostly common lowland species such as **Rufous-banded Honeyeater**. The best record was a pair of **Eastern Black-capped Lorys**. At the airport, **Singing Starlings** were the highlight, common birds of prey and swallows patrolling the grasslands.

SOGERI ROAD

Accommodation

The road to Varirata National Park is called the Sogeri Road. Sogeri is a settlement higher up on the road. There is rustic accommodation available at the park itself, but staying there would have required special arrangements in regard to provisions and bedding. I therefore preferred to stay at Bluff Inn Motel (tel. 328 1223), the only real option along the Sogeri Road, owned by the governor of the Enga province (where Kumul Lodge is located). The room cost K120 per night. In retrospect, I would probably been better off by staying in Port Moresby and commuting from there, as the distance was relatively short on the fine road, if the accommodation was available there. It was not, and also the Mapang Missionary Home was fully booked for those days. In January 2009, BIM definitely was not the most comfortable place to stay, but I

survived the three nights there. Once before sunrise, a **Papuan Boobook** was calling in a tree next to my room. Otherwise, not much to see in terms of birds, just the most abundant 'trash birds'.

My problems with the BIM had been caused by an incident one week earlier. A hydropower plant higher up the Sogeri River had opened its sluice gates rather abruptly, without warning, and drowned the valleys below it under several meters of flood water. Being located on the bank of the river, BIM got up to two meters of mud and water in its rooms, probably with some degree of unsanitary matters mixed in. All the beddings, curtains, furniture and electric appliances were ruined. The staff had done their best to clean the place, drying the remaining furniture outdoors, but at the end of the day it was a mission impossible. The rooms were still somewhat damp and dirty at the time of my arrival. One could see the maximum level of the flood water on walls and curtains, and connecting one's charger in a wall outlet produced rattling sparkles. The water in the shower and kitchen was brown in the beginning and become clear (more or less) only after a minute or two. There were plenty of mosquitoes in the room, as the nets in the windows had also been damaged, and the largest cockroach ever, with seven centimeter antennae (you may figure out the rest). Well, you get the picture... things could have been better.

The best feature of the motel was the bar/restaurant across the parking lot. They had good pub style meals for a reasonable price, fast service and a great selection of cold drinks, including the award-winning South Pacific lager. The Bluff Inn Motel was also peaceful and secure, partly because nobody else wanted to stay there so soon after the disaster. They may have now renovated the place, or closed it. Make sure to enquire beforehand.

Pacific Adventist University

This is a large gated campus along the Sogeri Road (signposted to the right). There are two main wetland style man-made ponds, extensive lawns and many large trees within the perimeter. One may explore the many roads by a car or walk through the park-like campus. A good marsh can be observed by the PAU highway junction, as well. In there, observations can easily be made from the security of one's car. The marsh did not hold **Grand Mannikins** but **Grey-headed Mannikins** were there, with a good variety of larger wetland species, such as **Royal Spoonbills**.

They charge K10 for birdwatching within the PAU premises. You are supposed to go the campus office to make the payment. I did not understand this, but paid the money to the guard at the gate, who happily accepted my suggestion to take the money to the office, or not. Birds are present any time of the day. The evening roost of egrets and herons is spectacular, and coincides with the arrival of nocturnal whistling ducks, such as the **Spotted Whistling Duck** (I saw mine at the highway marsh). At sunset, I counted 1600 roosting **Pied Herons** at the ponds, to give one example. **Comb-crested Jacanas** are always a pretty sight, and especially on red lotuses! **Papuan Frogmouths** do regularly roost at the campus, but checking out fifty trees did not deliver the species this time. Also the one at Varirata National Park main picnic site had left. **Green Figbirds** and **Tawny-breasted Bowerbirds** are especially common at PAU. A party of **Yellow-tinted Honey-eaters** was a nice bonus, because I had missed the species earlier.



Fig. 14. One of the birdy ponds at the Pacific Adventist University campus.



Fig. 15. An **Intermediate Egret** in breeding plumage, at the PAU ponds.

VARIRATA NATIONAL PARK

It is 16 kilometers from the Bluff Inn Motel to the entrance of the Varirata National Park, a 20-25 minute drive. Birding has seldom been as unproductive and productive as it was in the Varirata National Park. The weather tended to complicate things. On both full days, the morning was sunny and birdy for a moment but then fog set in, and I saw practically nothing for the next seven hours, despite much effort. Fortunately, birding was still possible with the help of the car, even when it rained (few light showers). Then, during the last few hours of the day, the weather cleared and new species kept on coming, with good visibility and bird activity. On the last morning, the weather stayed fine all morning but I could not get in until there was only one hour left, because the gatekeeper had over-slept. I kept on blowing the car horn but got attention only after two hours. The entrance is K5 per day, the money being readily collected as you approach the first house (left) after the park gate.

After leaving the Sogeri Road towards Varirata, on top of a left hand curve in a village, one climbs the hills up to a scenic picnic site with a bridge and rapids, where people prefer to swim and wash clothes. The climb continues till the edge of primary forest, from where it is less than one kilometer to the entrance gate. The road is narrow but ok even for a sedan. Along the access road, one may soon see the first female-plumaged **Raggiana Bird-of-Paradise**. They are common inside the national park. **Western Black-capped Lorys** and **Rainbow Lorikeets** are everywhere. **Yellow-bellied** and **Green-backed Gerygones**, an **Olive Flycatcher**, **White-throated Whistlers**, **Papuan Black Myzomelas**, **Pygmy Honeyeaters**, **Yellow-faced Mynas**, **Grey Crows**, and many others were also recorded. The bird species composition varies significantly between the section of the road before the rapids, the open woodland higher up, and up in the forested national park. It is a good idea to bird each of these sectors, the more open habitats by the edge of the primary forest being especially productive early in the morning and late in the afternoon. In the closed forest one tends to not see much at all, but the species seen may be particularly rewarding. In January, look for mixed **Pitohui**-lead flocks and the scarce but interesting small passerine parties.

Before the entrance gate, and just before the first Varirata National Park sign (large, on the left), thick forest meets open gallery forest on the left, on top of the last significant climb. This spot proved to be particularly productive for fruit-pigeons (**Ornate** (1), **Pink-spotted** and **Orange-bellied**), **Cuckoo-Shrikes** (e.g. **Black**, **Stout-billed**) and **Monarchs** (e.g. **Frilled**, **Spot-winged**, **Black-winged**, **Black-faced**). Hundred meters downhill, I saw a **Crested Pitohui** emerge from grass, having been agitated by a group of **Hooded Pitohuis** (common), low in the bush. The open forest had **Dollarbirds**, the more common **Cuckoo-Shrike** species and many other birds.

After the entrance gate, one goes forward along a one-way loop, through a rather rough spot. Down there is the central picnic opening, one of the best locations to look for canopy species with a scope - **Fruit-Pigeons**, **Cuckoo-Shrikes** and others often sit in the sun on top of dead trees. A few hundred meter long trail goes to a recently constructed Koiari Tree-House, with forest kingfishers and smaller passerines, such as **Rusty Mouse-Warbler**, **Chestnut-bellied Fantail** (I saw only one), my only positive **Yellow-legged Flycatcher** (supposedly common?) and **Slaty-chinned Longbill**. At the beginning of the trail, I was able to observe several mixed **Pitohui** bird parties. In there, two of the best records in Varirata were made: a nice **Pygmy Lorikeet** in a flock of **Rainbow Lorikeets** and three splendid **Dwarf Fruit-Doves** (1 male & 2 females) on top of a dead tree, together with a pair of **Pink-spotted Fruit-Doves**. What a sight! Other birds included **Eclectus Parrots**, **Moustached Tree-Swifts**, **Boyer's Cuckoo-shrikes**, a **Grey-headed Cuckoo-Shrike**, **Streak-**

headed Honeyeaters, Meyer's Friarbirds and Magnificent Riflebirds. Variable Pitohuis are not supposed to occur in Varirata. I wonder what the several **Hooded Pitohui** style birds with mostly dark rumps were, if that is accurate?!

Further on, one arrives to a Y-junction. The right track is the one way loop. Soon after the junction, to the right, one sees a pond on the left. There is another one behind it, with abandoned campground, and it is possible to drive there if you have a 4x4. Go slowly, as the car will tilt strongly at one point. I saw a **Dwarf Kingfisher**, a **Rufous-bellied Kookaburra** and a **Golden Monarch** there. Grasshoppers were plentiful in the low vegetation.

The left fork in the Y-junction goes up to Varirata Lookout. In the beginning, there is another abandoned campground. Soon afterwards, I saw several large bird parties, and a bit further on, a **Raggiana Bird-of-Paradise** lek was active on the left. A **Crinkle-collared Manucode** (once, in rain) and a **Mountain Drongo** (also once) were seen in this spot, too, which was also favored by **Red-throated Myzomelas**. A pair of **Yellow-billed Kingfishers** was regularly hunting by the road beyond the lek site. Later on, my bird records consisted mostly of unidentified calls and songs, or unidentified birds moving fast in the shadows. The same can be said about the lookout itself. I knew that tour groups go somewhere below it to look for pittas, but I decided to skip the trail, not knowing where exactly to go. All in all, the only trail I walked through in Varirata was the tree-house trail, partly due to weather conditions. To me, roadside birding appeared more productive in the limited time.



Fig. 16. The Varirata Lookout track, suitable for any type of a car.



Fig. 17. Varirata Lookout, with a view to Port Moresby and the ocean.

My three days in Varirata were a mere glimpse of the diversity the national park has to offer. Tour groups normally visit the place only briefly but an individual traveler should consider spending 4-7 days there, and at the other sites along the Sogeri Road. This is the most economical birdwatching destination in Papua-New Guinea, with a number of species which require time, persistence and luck. I did not even look for **Painted Quail-Thrush**, **Dwarf Cassowary** and several others. They are a good reason to visit the park again, in connection with another PNG visit.

