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Notes on the distribution and breeding of the Manus Friarbird *Philemon albitorques* and other birds of small islands of the Admiralties Group, Papua New Guinea

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Summary. Despite being a relatively common and well-known species locally, the ecology of the Manus Friarbird *Philemon albitorques* is not well documented in the literature. Here I present information on breeding and range extensions for this species, and for other bird species on small islands in the Admiralties Group, Papua New Guinea.

Manus Friarbird range extensions and breeding behaviour

The Manus Friarbird *Philemon albitorques* is a large honeyeater endemic to Manus Island, ~300 km north of the New Guinea mainland. Locally known as the 'Chauka', it is well known to local Manusians from its loud call and symbolic status (Galama 2002). It appears on the flag of Manus province, is the symbol of the local radio station (Maus Bilong Chauka) and a mascot for local businesses. Despite this, relatively little information on its ecology is documented in the scientific literature. The ecology of Manus Island's avifauna more generally is not well known (Coates 1990; Dutson 2011). Here I document range extensions and breeding behaviour of the Manus Friarbird, as well as notes on the distribution and breeding of some other bird species on other islands close to Manus in the Admiralties Group.

Range extensions

In the most recent comprehensive review of the birds of Melanesia, Dutson (2011, p. 356) described the distribution of the Manus Friarbird as 'Manus and probably Los Negros'. Coates (1990), Coates & Peckover (2001), Higgins *et al.* (2008) and BirdLife International (2013a) suggested that the Manus Friarbird is endemic to Manus Island. Yet Logan J. Bennett found this species on Los Negros Island in 1944 (Ripley 1947), Mayr & Diamond (2001) noted its presence on Manus and Los Negros, and Galama (2002) found it to be resident and breeding on Los Negros, an island which is only narrowly separated from the main Manus Island. Buckingham *et al.* (1990, p. 65) noted the species' range as only Manus Island but also stated that 'birds were also seen on Patumu Island [2°6'7"S, 147°17'3"E], a small coconut islet about 500 m offshore of Manus', suggesting that the species may occur on other small satellite islands despite the lack of published reports.

On 22 March 2013, I observed a single Manus Friarbird on Los Negros Island (2°04'S, 147°22'E), flying in lowland swampy flood forest. On 22–23 March, on Big Ndrova Island (2°12'28"S, 147°10'59"E), ~50 m off the southern coast of Manus Island, Manus Friarbirds were common around the Pere village (see also below). On 23 March 2013, at the small (~140 ha) Ndrilo Island (1°57'57"S, 147°19'42"E, ~5.7 km from Manus Island but only ~2.7 km from Los Negros) several Manus Friarbirds were seen in Coconut Palm *Cocos nucifera* plantations. The species was known by local villagers, who identified it as 'Chauka'.

The historical status of the Manus Friarbird on satellite islands such as Ndrilo Island is unclear: such islands might not have been visited by ornithologists, or the sightings not published. Galama (2002, p. 27) suggested that the major reason for the endemism of the Friarbird on Manus and Los Negros Islands 'lies in its short flight time and distance', although other members of the genus are capable of substantial movements (Keast 1968; Ford 1998). Its presence on Ndrilo Island suggests that this honeyeater is also likely to be present on the nearby islands of Koruniat, Hawei, Pityilu and Mandrin, which form a chain of islands to the north of Manus. However, examination of the 'Birds of Melanesia' online database of species lists for Melanesian islands (<http://birdsofmelanesia.net/>) revealed only one other record of Manus Friarbirds on islands off Manus and Los Negros: Ringer (*in litt.* in Tarburton 2013a) reported that locals claim they introduced the species to Hus Islet (1°56'00"S, 147°06'00"E) in c. 2000.

Galama (2002) suggested that the disturbance and destruction of forests on Los Negros during the Second World War and the introduction of large Coconut Palm plantations (which provide protection, nesting material and food) has attracted many Manus Friarbirds to these areas. This assessment is further supported by BirdLife International (2013b), which reported that islanders on the tiny island of Tong say that the Manus Fantail *Rhipidura semirubra* survives on that island 'because of the absence of *Philemon albitorques*, which may have undergone a population explosion (detrimental to *R. semirubra*) associated with human colonization and clearance on Manus (D. Gibbs *in litt.* 1994)'. However, Galama (2002, p. 32) also suggested that 'introduction of plantations on other islands did not result in similar occurrences of *P. albitorques*', and suggested two reasons for this phenomenon are '1) the inability of *P. albitorques* to fly away from mainland Manus and 2) the lack of natural water sources'. My observations on Ndrilo and those reported by Tarburton (2013a) on Hus Islet suggest that the Friarbird has further expanded its range into disturbed areas/plantations on smaller islands. As this species is noisy and conspicuous, it is unlikely to be overlooked by villagers or visiting ornithologists, but further investigation is required to determine its presence on other nearby islands and the means of its colonisation (be it natural or human-assisted).

Breeding behaviour

On 23 March, at Pere village on Big Ndrova Island, a pair of Manus Friarbirds was observed calling together from the leaves of a Coconut Palm just before sunset. The next day, a single Friarbird was observed carrying a stick to the same palm,

where it remained in the fronds for several minutes. Although nest-construction could not be observed because of the height of the palm and position of the coconut fronds, this was interpreted as nest-building.

Coates (1990, p. 255) stated that 'active nests [of Manus Friarbirds] have been observed in mid-March (adult sitting) and early August', and Galama (2002) suggested that breeding takes place between July and November on Los Negros. My observations of the collection of nest-material fall within these recorded time periods. Although Coates (1990, p. 255) suggested the 'nest is suspended moderately high up in an outer fork of a slender branch', which is consistent with nests of other friarbird species, no friarbird species have been recorded nesting in palms (Higgins *et al.* 2008). Galama (2002, p. 31) found that Manus Friarbird nests are built in a 'wide range of places such as large forest trees, coconut palms, backyard fruit trees, and shrubs'. Confirmation of nesting in Coconut Palms would further support the Manus Friarbird's association with non-forest habitat.

Records of other birds from small islands

Ndrilo Island

There appear to be no records in the literature (including the website <http://birdsofmelanesia.net/>) documenting the birds of the 140-ha Ndrilo Island. During a 1.5-hour visit to the island on 23 March, I recorded Coconut Lorikeet *Trichoglossus haematodus* and Manus Friarbird, as well as Eastern Reef Egret *Egretta sacra*, Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*, Lesser Sand Plover *Charadrius mongolus*, Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos* and Grey-tailed Tattler *Tringa brevipes*.

Rara Island

A ~30-minute visit to the small Rara Island (~3 ha; 2°00'53"S, 147°17'03"E) was made on 25 March 2013. I made three separate observations of pairs of Coconut Lorikeets exiting hollows ~20 m up large rainforest trees and a fig. Two of the hollows were characterised by the presence of a thin-fronded epiphytic fern. Whether the birds were entering a tree-hollow or a hollow root mass of the epiphytic ferns could not be determined. In both these instances, one of the pair was 'guarding' the site, perched on the trunk within centimetres of the hollow, while the other was entering, inspecting or excavating the hollow. The bird on guard was very noisy, and clearly agitated by my presence.

Other bird species observed on Rara Island included Island Imperial-Pigeon *Ducula pistrinaria*, Eastern Reef Egret, and Brahminy Kite *Haliastur indus*. Melanesian Megapodes *Megapodius eremita* are reported from the island (Manuai Matawai pers. comm. 2013). The only previous information for the islet was from Burrows (2005 in Tarburton 2013b), who recorded Island Imperial-Pigeon, Mackinlay's Cuckoo-Dove *Macropygia mackinlayi*, Eastern Reef Egret, Beach Kingfisher *Todiramphus saurophaga* and Island Monarch *Monarcha cinerascens*.

There is limited breeding data for the Coconut Lorikeet *Trichoglossus haematodus flavicans*, which is endemic to the Admiralties Group and New Hanover. LeCroy *et al.* (1992) found this subspecies nesting on the ground on the islet of Poy-yai (0.5 ha), 5.5 km west of Pere Village, on 27–28 July 1988. They found no sign of nesting in tree-hollows; few trees on the islet were large enough to provide suitable cavities for the Lorikeets. There were many apparent excavations, from bare areas sheltered at the base of a tree or within a rock crevice, to ‘burrows’ 0.6 m deep under a rock overhang or 1 m deep in a rock crevice. LeCroy *et al.* (1992) noted that nesting of this subspecies on the main islands (i.e. Manus) has not been described. Coates (1985) summarised breeding records for other subspecies in New Guinea, suggesting that breeding can occur in most months.

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