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REVIEWS

The Birds of Sumatra, by J.G. Van Marle and K.H. Voous. British Ornithologists' Union Checklist No. 10. British Ornithologists' Union, c/o The British Museum (Nat. Hist.), London. 240 pp. (1988), $16.00.

Indonesia extends some 6000 km from NW to SE and is endowed with an avifauna of over 1500 species, a high total resulting from a wide range of habitats, particularly tropical rain forests, encompassing two quite distinct bio-geographic regions, the Sundanese and Papuan (or three, if the wide transitional zone of Wallacea is included). Yet the avifauna is very poorly known when compared with an equivalent area, say, of mainland Asia. Perhaps a reason for this is that Indonesia has never benefitted from the presence of a Boonsong Lekagul or a Salim Ali who did so much to encourage the hobby of bird-watching in their respective countries. The Indonesian Ornithological Society does not yet have a definitive bird list for the Republic, but a series of recent publications considerably simplifies the task of such a compilation. Two of these are in the BOU Checklist Series, Wallacea (No. 7) in 1986 and now Sumatra (No. 10).

Sumatra is part of the Pleistocene Sundanese sub-continent that encompasses also Borneo, Java, Malaysia and peninsular Thailand north to about the Kra Isthmus. With its off-shore islands, the Sumatran list amounts to 600 species. 450 of these are assumed to be residents, although breeding has actually been confirmed for less than half this number. The majority of these residents occur also in the neighbouring Sundanese land areas, and the fact that only 16 species are endemic reflects this similarity. Four of the endemics are confined to the West Sumatran islands (three *Otus* spp and one *Zosterops*), and the remainder on the mainland are almost entirely montane. Probably a seventeenth should be added, the mysterious flycatcher *Cyornis ruecki*, known from two specimens from lowland Sumatra and two old trade skins with a Malayan label.

In contrast, geographic isolation has resulted in the separation of 83 endemic sub-species recognized on the mainland, and proportionally many more on the West Sumatran islands, and again it is these islands and the mountains that show the greatest degree of endemism, with the least in the broad lowlands of eastern Sumatra and their low, outliers, Bangka and Belitung.

The checklist reveals some interesting bio-geographic 'anomalies'. Thus *Eurostopodus macrotis* of oriental provenance (including the Philippines and Sulawesi) occurs only on Simeulue, the northernmost of the West Sumatran islands. Likewise, *Psittacula alexandri*, whose distribution in Indonesia is based on Java, Bali and SE Borneo, occurs only on Simeulue and Nias. Some other mainland SE Asian forms absent from the Malay Peninsula include, *inter alia*, *Chloropsis aurifrons*, *Garrulax leucolophus* (a very distinctive race) and *Brachypteryx montana*. Among those mainland species that presumably became isolated in Java at the end of the Pleistocene,

aurigaster and *Sturnus contra*, although the latter two may have resulted from some appear to be re-invading northwards, such as *Cisticola exilis, Pycnonotus* introductions. To this might be added *Tyto alba*, and perhaps, *Caprimulgus affinis* which now occurs throughout Sumatra, though it has been a less successful colonizer in Borneo. A recent addition from the north is *Halcyon smyrnensis* which is now common throughout Sumatra. Of interest, too, is *Parus major*, a rare bird of the coastal zone in Malaysia and Kalimantan, especially mangroves. In Sumatra it is found widely in wooded habitats in the uplands, as it is in Java.

There are several species annotated by the compilers as enigmatic, signifying that they are known from perhaps one or two specimens or records only, dating from up to a century ago, species such as *Melanochlora sultanea, Pycnonotus neiuwenhuisii* and the endemic *Trichastoma vanderbilti*. Those who have been following the fortunes of *Pitta gurneyi* in South Thailand will be interested in the mystery of *Pitta schneideri*, a Sumatran endemic described as locally 'very common' 70 years ago but never recorded since (although its rediscovery has been reported at the time of preparing this review). Indeed there are four other species of pitta for which there is little recent information.

Sumatra is experiencing the same deforestation as most equatorial regions. Some of the uplands and coastal areas have been settled for many centuries, and there was a boom of new plantations in the fertile lowlands around Medan during the colonial era, a region that must have had a rich diversity. Recent decades have seen deforestation at accelerating rates particularly through the lowlands, due in part to expanding population pressures out of Java. The distribution of forests shown on Map 3, which is at too small scale for easy reading, appears to be very optimistic. Recent remote sensing studies have shown that only about half of Sumatra still has a forest cover, but this is principally in the mountains and coastal peat swamps.

Map 2 is more useful, showing the largest reserved areas. However it should be realized that the three largest reserves are mainly hilly or mountainous, while Berbak and Padang Sugihan are mainly peat swamp. This leaves Way Kambas as the only large reserved area for the vitally important lowland mixed dipterocarp forests.

Of course there are other reserves of various categories, either gazetted or under process, but there is an urgent need to protect further lowland sites, as well as areas of the West Sumatran islands with their specific faunas and cultures. A major conservation initiative is in progress, through the Indonesian office of the Asian Wetland Bureau, in co-operation with the Ministry of Forestry, to secure further areas of the remote, muddy, mangrove-lined east coast, which has only recently been identified as one of the most important wader transit and wintering grounds in SE Asia. The 100,000 waders include up to 4000 *Limnodromus semipalmatus*, and it is perhaps symptomatic of Sumatran, or Indonesian, ornithology that there has been only one previous unsubstantiated Sumatran record! This area is also notable as a major stronghold of several large waterbirds, notably *Mycteria cinerea*, but further studies are required to identify the most important habitats. At time of writing, the

Asian Wetland Bureau has just reported the discovery of three breeding locations in 1988, with over 1000 nests. This is a major find, as outside Java very few stork and heron colonies have been found. There is even a possibility that *Pelecanus philippensis* may still breed in Sumatra.

One major reservation with this work concerns the complex and sometimes sensitive issue of acceptance of previously unpublished records. While most of the early research has been based on collections and museum studies, this has been replaced in the last two decades almost entirely by field descriptions from visiting ornithologists, some of whom may not be fully familiar with the regional avifauna. This is a problem faced by many editors or compilers, but it is felt that new species, accepted on the basis of single field observations, must be placed in square brackets, unless there is a published reference for the record. Assessing the validity of such records must have been an unenviable task, but future workers will not have access to the correspondence which was used in adjudication.

A second criticism is the number of transcription and typing errors in the systematic section. This reviewer found a number of incorrect entries of records that he himself submitted, sometimes serious errors such as entries under the wrong species, and it is important that the authors acknowledge such errors by publishing corrections.

While there is a wide range of variation in the depth of analysis and discussion of taxonomic problems through the BOU Checklist series, that for Wallacea being the most thorough, there would have been scope for more detailed evaluation in this case. While the relevant references are usually given, some more reasoned discussion and opinion would have been beneficial.

In summary, *The Birds of Sumatra* is the latest in the invaluable BOU Checklist series that is designed to compile and synthesize all that is known on the status and distribution of birds in the lesser known regions of the world, to serve as a data-base for further scientific and conservation-oriented research. The back cover lists 11 more regions for future publication, and we look foreward to these and hopefully more.

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