

BIRDING HOTSPOT

Flores and Komodo: two islands of Northern Nusa Tenggara

ATTILA SIMAY, TAMAS ZALAI & ZOLTAN ECSEDI

Introduction

The Lesser Sunda Islands (Nusa Tenggara) stretch for some 1,800 km eastwards from Lombok to Timor and beyond in the region of Wallacea (Coates & Bishop 1997). They include the “dry tropics” of Indonesia, and indeed the arid nature of islands such as Sumba, parts of Flores, Komodo and Timor contrast sharply with the lush habitats of the rest of the Indonesian archipelago. Wallacea is, from a biogeographical point of view, a transitional zone between Asia and Australasia. This duality is also characteristic of its birdlife, since families of Asia as well as Australia can be found here. Its western border is designated by Wallace’s line, which lies between the islands of Bali and Lombok, and its eastern boundary is marked by the Tanimbar islands. Nusa Tenggara comprises four biogeographical regions (Stattersfield *et al.* 1998). Of these, Northern Nusa Tenggara includes the islands of Lombok, Sumbawa, Komodo, Flores and Alor.

The threat of destruction to natural habitats is a serious problem in Indonesia and on many islands forested habitats are now restricted to areas designated as national parks. Unfortunately this is generally true in the Lesser Sundas and only tiny forests confined to protected areas which are not always well managed have survived. In Flores the situation is somewhat better, and there are good

quality woodlands outside national park areas. Komodo is famous worldwide, first because the entire island is a well-run national park, and second it is home to the Komodo Dragon *Varanus komodoensis*, the largest lizard in the world. Little information has been published about Flores and Komodo in recent years (Jepson 1997, Bostock & Sujanika 1993, Verhoeve & Holmes 1999) and we hope our notes will be of assistance to visiting birdwatchers.

Logistics

Travelling to and between remote and practically tourist-free islands of Indonesia has proved difficult for birdwatchers, owing to frequent unexpected airline schedule changes, with many flights departing a day earlier or several days later than advertised! Our group, however, did not have any serious problems, maybe because the travel arrangements were made by a local travel agent, who notified us of all flight changes and provided a car and a driver as well as a guide, on request. Booking flights and renting a vehicle yourself is only recommended if you have plenty of time on your hands. Roads on the islands are narrow and meandering and very bad in the hills, so that travel is very slow. We suggest renting cars with drivers, unless you speak the local language, since roads

Plate 1. Komodo Dragon *Varanus komodoensis*, Komodo, August 2007.



are badly signposted, and if you get lost, locals are usually unable to help you, however hard they may try. The local population is exceptionally friendly and we had no problems throughout the trip. Meals are excellent; we always tried the local specialities without any problems. Bottled water is widely available in the villages, but beer is not available everywhere.

A trip to the Lesser Sundas following the “classic” route should be scheduled as follows: Sumba requires three days, whilst it is worth devoting eight days to Flores, two of which can be spent visiting Komodo. Those who want to include Timor should allow a further six days. The time periods given above are more than enough to find the important bird species, but allow for the unreliable domestic air service mentioned above. You must be ready to reschedule the itinerary at any time throughout the journey.

Flores specialities

The birdlife of Flores is exceptionally rich: 27 Lesser Sundas endemics may be seen, five of which are not found elsewhere—Flores Lorikeet *Trichoglossus weberi*, Wallace’s Hanging Parrot *Loriculus pusillus*, Flores Scops Owl *Otus alfredi*, Flores Crow *Corvus florensis* and Flores Monarch *Monarcha sacerdotum*. Fourteen endemic species are found in the western Lesser Sundas, of which ten are found on Flores and Sumbawa only, and four are additionally shared with Lombok (marked with an asterisk): Flores Hawk Eagle *Spizaetus floris**, Flores Green Pigeon *Treron floris**, Wallace’s Scops Owl *Otus silvicola*, White-rumped Kingfisher *Caridonax fulgidus**, Flores Minivet *Pericrocotus lansbergei*, Russet-capped Tesia *Tesia everetti*, Brown-capped Fantail *Rhipidura diluta*, Bare-throated Whistler *Pachycephala orpheus*, Scaly-crowned Honeyeater *Lichmera lombokia**, Golden-rumped Flowerpecker *Dicaeum annae*, Black-fronted Flowerpecker *Dicaeum igniferum*, Yellow-browed White-eye *Lophozosterops superciliaris*, Crested White-eye *Lophozosterops dohertyi* and Thick-billed White-eye *Heleia crassirostris*. Flores and Timor share two endemics, of which Timor Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus presbytes* is found only on these two islands, while Flame-breasted Sunbird *Nectarinia solaris* can also be seen on Sumbawa and Wetar. Three endemics are found on Sumba as well as on Flores and Sumbawa: Sumba Cicadabird *Coracina dohertyi*, Russet-backed Jungle Flycatcher *Rhinomyias oscillans* and Yellow-spectacled White-eye *Zosterops wallacei*. Mees’s Nightjar *Caprimulus meesi* is a new distinct species, previously part of the widespread Large-tailed Nightjar *C. macrurus* complex. The taxonomy is currently still under review by BirdLife; if accepted



Plate 2. Wallace’s Scops Owl *Otus silvicola*, Kisol, Flores, August 2007.

it is known to occur only on Flores and Sumba. Finally, two further Lesser Sundas endemics, Chestnut-backed Thrush *Zoothera dohertyi* and Five-coloured Munia *Lonchura quinticolor*, may be seen on Flores.

Birdwatching sites

If possible, book a flight to Labuhanbajo, the westernmost settlement in Flores, since this town is the best starting point to explore the island and you can also hire a boat to Komodo. Our plane landed in Ende, so we spent nearly a day driving west to reach the first birding site.

Species such as Yellow-spectacled White-eye, Black-fronted Flowerpecker and Flame-breasted Sunbird are widespread and common in suitable habitat, whilst Brown-capped Fantail and Scaly-crowned Honeyeater are common in upland areas. Timor Leaf Warbler is also common in suitable habitat and well worth seeking out as the local race may acquire full species status. The same consideration applies to Russet-backed Jungle Flycatcher, which is fairly common in the forests near Poko Ranaka and may be treated as a full species alongside the Sumba race in the future.

Kisol: Most birdwatchers stay at the local Catholic Seminary, which is worth booking in advance. If it is fully booked, the hotel in Mborang the next village is just as good. The beginning of the trail may be reached by car from the accommodation. The trail itself runs along a short part of the eastern side of Gunung Pacandeki. Pedestrian traffic is significant, but locals are friendly towards and patient with birdwatchers.

White-rumped Kingfisher is common along the trail and Elegant Pitta *Pitta elegans* may be seen in the undergrowth. Flocks of Flores Minivet, not uncommon in all wooded habitats, and the Endangered Flores Crow forage in the canopy. This is the best site for the latter and its strange song, similar to a crying human baby, has to be heard to be believed. The flocks of 10–15 birds are hard to see in the canopy. Along the first 100 m of the path it is worth looking for Chestnut-capped Thrush *Zosterops interpres*, although it is exceptionally difficult to get good views. You have a good chance to see Thick-billed White-eye here, although it is a species that is not easy to see. Two difficult specialities of the island may be seen here: the Flores Green Pigeon can be chanced upon anywhere in the forests but is easier to hear than see (it is commoner in the east of Flores and on the island of Lomblen that lies between Flores and Alor), and a good place to observe the Endangered Flores Hawk Eagle soaring is from a fork in the main trail: bear right towards Gunung Pacandeki and find a clearing, from where you have a clear view of the hill. A few hours' wait should be enough to reap the reward. Less than 100 pairs are thought to survive in the wild (see p.42).

Night birding is also rewarding, since you can hope to find not only Mees's Nightjar and Moluccan Scops Owl *Otus magicus*, but also Wallace's Scops Owl. Located by its barking call it is possible to find, with persistence, at the forest edge nearest the village.

Around Ruteng: There are no problems getting accommodation and meals in Ruteng. From here it is about an hour by car to the birding sites. Danau Ranamese is the most important site and on the shore of the small montane lake stands what was once a "research station" which provided accommodation; now most of the buildings are abandoned and derelict. Start birdwatching at the buildings and walk back along the road to Ruteng; specialities are Chestnut-backed Thrush which is unusually confiding for a *Zosterops* species and Russet-capped Tesia: this tiny bird is common and frequently heard in many habitats, but stays concealed close to the ground. Elegant Pittas are heard at many places and White-rumped Kingfishers hunt from perches on the overhead wires at dusk. It is easy to overlook the relatively rare Golden-rumped Flowerpecker, but the Bare-throated Whistler with its beautiful, far-carrying song, is impossible to miss. This is also the place to look for small flocks of the Yellow-browed White-eye and also the Crested White-eye, but the real attraction is the Flores Scops Owl. This small owl was rediscovered in 1994 (Widodo *et al.* 1999) and



Plate 3. Ruteng, Flores, August 2007.



Plate 4. White-rumped Kingfisher *Caridonax fulgidus*, Ruteng, Flores, August 2007.

Plate 5. Poco Ranaca, Ruteng, Flores August 2007.





Plate 6. Labuhanbajo, Flores, August 2007.



Plate 7. Javan Plover *Charadrius javanicus*, Labuhanbajo, Flores, August 2007.

Plate 8. Yellow-crested Cockatoo *Cacatua sulphurea*, Komodo, August 2007.



the first recordings were not made until 2005 (Hutchinson *et al.* 2007) when it was found to be more common than previously thought. It is best looked for along the first five km of the road from Danau Ranamese to Ruteng, but the search for the owl, creeping and crawling in dense vegetation at night, requires determination, care and a good light. Wallace's Scops Owl and Mees's Nightjar are found here too and easier to find than the previous species.

Golo Lusang pass, the best place for the endemic Flores Lorikeet, is a short drive from Ruteng. While you are waiting for lorikeets to fly over the valley, you can listen to the beautiful song of the Bare-throated Whistler. If you miss Wallace's Hanging Parrot at Potawangka, another place to try is Pagal to the north of Ruteng.

Puarlolo telecom tower: It is easiest to visit the area on the way from Ruteng to Labuhanbajo. The forest surrounding the tower is the most reliable site for Flores Monarch, discovered as recently as 1971. Walk the trails in the forest on the right hand side of the road leading to the transmitter. This is also the best site for Crested White-eye and there is good chance to encounter flocks of Thick-billed White-eye.

Labuhanbajo: There is plenty of accommodation along the main street on the beach, where there are plenty of excellent restaurants. A boat for the trip to Komodo and a microbus for Potawangka road can be hired here. If you have time, seaside agricultural areas and fish ponds near the town are worth visiting; we saw Javan Plover *Charadrius javanicus* here.

Potawangka road: This wooded area is about 30 minutes drive from Labuhanbajo, along a badly deteriorated road suitable for light traffic only. The main targets are Wallace's Hanging Parrots, which are seen flying swiftly over the road, but are very



Plate 9. Komodo, August 2007.

difficult to find in the canopy. The site offers another opportunity to see the Flores Crow. At dusk Great-billed Parrots *Tanygnathus megalorhynchos* fly over the area to roost, Elegant Pitta is heard in several parts of the forest and at night Savanna Nightjars *Caprimulgus affinis* sit on the road.

Komodo: When you are in Flores, visiting Komodo is a must. Boats can be rented in Labuhanbajo, it takes about four hours to reach the island. On the way there you can see Greater *Fregata minor* and Lesser Frigatebird *F. ariel*, Bulwer's Petrel *Bulweria bulwerii*, Streaked Shearwater *Calonectris leucomelas* as well as flocks of wintering Red-necked Phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus*. As the boat approaches the islands, you have a good chance to spot a Great-billed Heron *Ardea sumatrana*. We spent the night on the boat, under the open sky, but it is possible to stay at the national park accommodation on the island, where at dusk Moluccan Scops Owls fly about. On the boat we were treated to food and drink, but refreshments may also be purchased on the island. There is only one village in Komodo, but tourists and birdwatchers are taken to the park visitor centre. It is obligatory to hire a guide armed with a forked stick, to ward off potential attacks by the dragon. It is not just for show, since unfortunately casualties occur every year. Nervous visitors can see "tame" animals near the restaurant, but it is an unparalleled experience to meet a monster along a trail. Most of the wild life on the island is extremely tame. The most famous ornithological speciality is the healthy population of the Critically Endangered Yellow-crested Cockatoo *Cacatua sulphurea*, a species now very rare everywhere; the sight of a flock coming into roost is spectacular. It also occurs on Sumba, although the race *citrinocristata* found there is deemed by some authors to be a different species "Citron-crested Cockatoo". Although Sumba Cicadabird is found in most wooded habitats, it is easier to see on Komodo than Flores. Green

Junglefowl *Gallus varius* are present in good numbers and the Orange-footed Scrubfowl *Megapodius reinwardt* population is also worth mentioning.

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Attila Simay,
H-4032 Debrecen, Kartács u. 6. Hungary
Email: attillasimay@gmail.com

Tamás Zalai,
H-5100 Jászberény, Berényi u. 6. Hungary
Email: zalait@hnp.hu

Zoltán Ecsedi,
H-4060 Balmazújváros, Esze T u. 8. Hungary
Email: hortobagy.te@chello.hu