

CONSERVATION ON THE SANGIHE AND TALAUD ISLANDS

by Jon Riley

Indonesia is a biodiversity hot spot. It has the world's fourth most diverse avifauna and the dubious privilege of being ranked first in global terms with respect to the number of threatened species it supports (Collar et al., 1994). Perhaps one of the most important areas for bird conservation in Indonesia is the Sangihe-Talaud Archipelago, which stretches north from Sulawesi in central Indonesia towards the Philippines.

Over the last three years I have organised Action Sampiri, an Anglo-Indonesian project that has gathered basic biological information from Sangihe and Talaud and sought to use this information to develop a conservation education-awareness programme. The project takes its title from the local name of the beautiful Red and Blue Lory *Eos histrio*, one of six bird species that are found on Sangihe and Talaud and nowhere else in the world (Riley, 1997a).

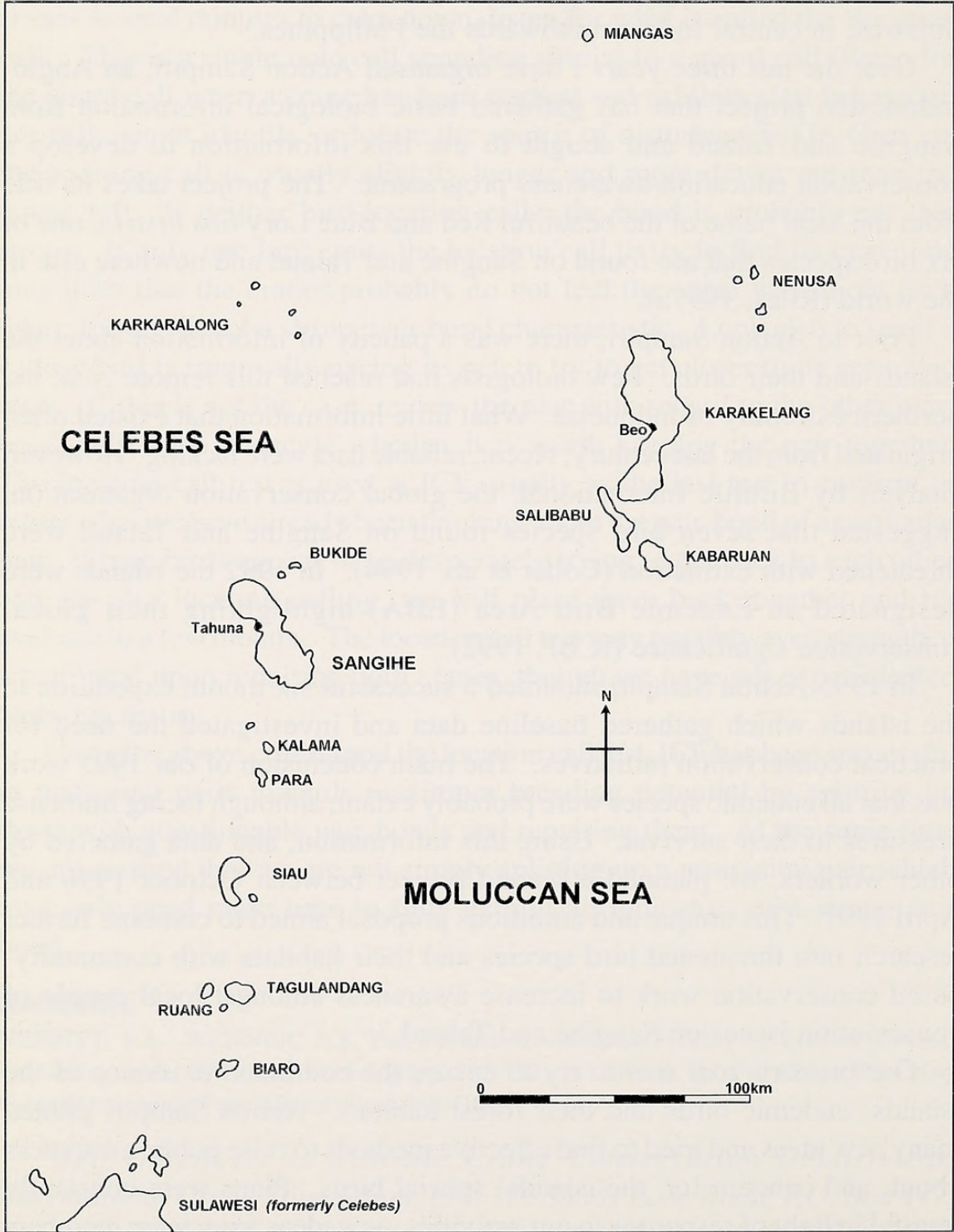
Prior to Action Sampiri, there was a paucity of information about the islands and their birds. Few biologists had reached this remote area, the northern extremity of Indonesia. What little information that existed often originated from the last century; recent, reliable data were lacking. However, analysis by Birdlife International, the global conservation organisation, suggested that seven bird species found on Sangihe and Talaud were threatened with extinction (Collar et al., 1994). In 1992 the islands were designated an Endemic Bird Area (EBA) highlighting their global conservation significance (ICBP, 1992).

In 1995 Action Sampiri mounted a successful six month expedition to the islands which gathered baseline data and investigated the need for practical conservation initiatives. The main conclusion of our 1995 work was that all endemic species were probably extant, although facing immense pressures to their survival. Using this information, and data gathered by other workers, we planned a second project between October 1996 and April 1997. This unique and ambitious proposal aimed to combine further research into threatened bird species and their habitats with community-based conservation work to increase awareness amongst local people of conservation issues on Sangihe and Talaud.

Our primary goal was to try to ensure the continued existence of the islands' endemic birds and their forest habitats. Action Sampiri piloted many new ideas and tried to find effective methods to raise public awareness about, and concern for, the islands' special birds. Plans were constantly revised in light of responses to our activities, new ideas from team members

and new information resulting from research. The project attempted to adopt a ‘bottom up’ approach, letting the community play a central role in conservation on the islands, rather than leaving solutions in the hands of outsiders.

In 1996/1997 research focused on three key sites identified in 1995 as priority areas for bird conservation on the islands. Results were exciting: we confirmed the presence of all threatened bird species and provided evidence confirming the existence and validity of a sixth endemic species.



BIRD SPECIES ACCOUNTS

A total of 156 bird species have been recorded within the Sangihe and Talaud EBA to date (White & Bruce, 1986; F. Lambert *in litt.* 1996; Riley *in press*), 111 on Sangihe, 79 on Siau and 123 on Talaud. Nineteen species are listed as threatened, near-threatened or restricted-range (ICBP, 1992; Collar et al. 1994; Stattersfield et al. 1997) and a brief summary of their status is included below.

CRITICAL

Caerulean Paradise Flycatcher *Eutrichomyias rowleyi*

One possible sighting was made at Talawid in northern Sangihe (see Riley, 1997b). A bird was observed by a single observer in forest edge slash and burn cultivation scrub on 11th September 1995 at c.240 m. (approx. 790ft). The site was revisited in October 1995 and December 1996, but the bird was not relocated.

Sangihe Shrike-thrush *Colluricincla sanghirensis*

Previously known from two specimens treated with caution by White & Bruce (1986), and unpublished material collected by F. G. Rozendaal in 1985 (R. Dekker *in litt.* 1997). At two locations above c.850m (approx. 2,800ft) on the volcanic caldera of Gunung Sahengbalira in southern Sangihe, groups of up to 15 birds were observed on ten dates in October-December 1996. Vocalisations were tape-recorded; a bird was mist-netted, photographed, blood samples taken for DNA analysis, and a specimen prepared which has been deposited at the Bogor Zoological Museum in Indonesia. Differences in habitat preferences, vocalisations, plumage and bill coloration between the Sangihe birds and Little Shrike-thrush *Colluricincla megarhyncha* of New Guinea and adjacent offshore islands (Coates, 1990; White & Bruce, 1986) strongly suggest that the former should be accorded specific status. Given its apparently restricted distribution and altitudinal range, *Colluricincla sanghirensis* should be included on the list of globally threatened species as critical.

ENDANGERED

Red and Blue Lory *Eos histrio*

The population status of *Eos histrio* on Talaud was assessed and ecological data collected. Results from 1995 and 1997 projects can be compared with work in 1996 (Lambert, 1997) to determine the decline of this species. Six roost trees were counted: in Tuabatu, an area renowned for its bird-trapping, the roost declined from c.250 individuals to c.50 birds in the 18 months between our two expeditions. We researched illegal trade,

the main threat to this charismatic bird, through informal interviews with residents and by direct observations. Trapping is the major factor threatening the species at present. Action Sampiri gave estimates in local meetings of a total Karakelang (and thus world) population of 5,000-10,000 *Eos histrio*, with c.1,000 birds being lost to trade in 1996. In 1995, the endemic Sangihe race *E. h. histrio* was rediscovered at Talawid. No observations of the race were made in 1996 (see Lambert, 1997). Local inhabitants suggested this was not the right season for seeing it, but in meetings held on Sangihe-Talaud, we stated the Sangihe race of this endemic species to be extinct. We recommend upgrading the Red and Blue Lory to critical.

Blue-naped Parrot *Tanygnathus lucionensis*

The Talaud race of Blue-naped Parrot *T. l. talautensis* was regularly encountered in primary forest and an unfledged juvenile was photographed in northern Karakelang in mid-March. Karakelang supports an important population of this species, which appears to be widespread at low densities. The species is likely to be demoted to near-threatened in the forthcoming *Asia Bird Red Data Book* (J. C. Lowen verbally 1997).

Sangihe Hanging Parrot *Loriculus catamene*

Sangihe Hanging Parrot was found to be present in all areas visited. It has apparently adapted to habitat changes that have accrued from forest clearance. Threats include habitat loss, hunting, disease and poisoning by agricultural chemicals.

Elegant Sunbird *Aethopyga duyvenbodei*

Elegant Sunbird was relatively common in forest and adjacent cultivated areas, but was absent from areas without remnant forest patches. Gunung Sahengbalira supports an important population of the sunbird. The main pressure is loss of habitat.

VULNERABLE

Philippine Megapode *Megapodius cumingi*

On Sangihe this species was encountered irregularly, with the majority of records coming from Gunung Sahengbalira and Talawid. In contrast the species was very commonly encountered on Karakelang and this island may form a stronghold.

Grey Imperial Pigeon *Ducula pickeringii*

In February 1997 Action Sampiri observed what is probably one of the largest flocks ever recorded of the species, with a minimum of 18 birds going to roost on Karakelang. Talaud may form a stronghold for this species.

NEAR-THREATENED

Nine near-threatened species have been recorded within the Sangihe and Talaud EBA. Two are thought to be migrants or vagrants with very few records: Far Eastern Curlew *Numenius madagascariensis* and Chestnut-cheeked Starling *Sturnus philippensis*; a third, Great-billed Heron *Ardea sumatrana* is only known from historical records (White & Bruce, 1986; Riley in press).

Schrenck's Bittern *Ixobrychus eurhythmus*

A winter visitor to Wallacea that, in the EBA has been recorded on Siau and Talaud. Recent records are from Karakelang and Salibabu where the bittern was occasionally observed in open secondary forest and cultivated areas.

Malaysian Plover *Charadrius peronii*

Only recorded from beaches in northern Karakelang, with observations from three sites. These records, in 1995 and 1997, are the first from within the EBA.

Nicobar Pigeon *Caloenas nicobarica*

There are historical records of this small island specialist from Sangihe, Siau and Talaud. The few recent records are from Karakelang where the pigeon is apparently uncommon and restricted to primary forest.

Talaud Kingfisher *Halcyon enigma*

Ecological data were gathered on the endemic Talaud Kingfisher, supporting the opinion (see e.g. White & Bruce, 1986) that this species has undergone speciation and merits specific status. The kingfisher was regularly observed in primary forest and degraded forest on Karakelang and Salibabu.

Pied Cuckoo-shrike *Coracina bicolor*

A record on Gunung Sahengbalira was the first on Sangihe since the nineteenth century. Given this single observation, the cuckoo-shrike is assumed to be rare.

Philippine Paradise Flycatcher *Terpsiphone cinnamomea*

A commonly encountered species in all habitats on Karakelang and Salibabu; represented on Talaud by the endemic race *talautensis*.

OTHER SIGNIFICANT RECORDS

Rail *Gymnocyrex* sp.

One sighting was made of an undescribed taxon of *Gymnocyrex* rail in marshy cultivation near Beo in March 1997. Dr. F. R. Lambert collected a specimen of this taxon in September 1996, which apparently represents a species new to science. A paper providing details of this taxon is in preparation. If confirmed, the rail will become the seventh species endemic to Sangihe and Talaud (F. Lambert *in litt.* 1997).

Lilac-cheeked Kingfisher *Cittura cyanotis*

On Sangihe, Lilac-cheeked Kingfisher *C. c. sanghirensis* - a little known endemic race - was frequently observed, extensive ecological information was gathered and two individuals trapped and blood samples taken.

Black-fronted White-eye *Zosterops atrifrons*

Field observations of the Sangihe race of Black-fronted White-eye *Z. a. nehrkorni* were made on the Gunung Sahengbalira ridge. This race was previously known only from the type specimen collected last century, but since mislaid (White & Bruce, 1986).

Golden Bulbul *Ixos affinis*

Observations of the Sangihe race of Golden Bulbul *I. a. platenae* suggest this well-marked taxon is extremely rare and dependent on remnant forest on Gunung Sahengbalira.

EDUCATION PROGRAMME

Perhaps more encouraging was the impact of the education programme. In all the villages we visited, people were fascinated to learn about their special birds and the problems they face.

On Sangihe we opened a Bird Information Centre in Tamako, the largest town closest to Mt Sahengbalira, converting a shop into a walk-in area equipped with educational resources including books, posters and picture boards. The centre was staffed by project members and received over 800 visitors in the course of six weeks. We also visited ten schools and gave talks about the island's endemic birds to a total of almost 1,500 pupils aged between five and 18 years old. An awareness campaign in the village of Ulung Peliang, close to Sangihe's largest forest area, resulted in a village law being passed to protect remaining natural habitat.

On the Talaud Islands our work concentrated on Karakelang, the largest island in the archipelago, and the home of the vast majority of the world population of Red and Blue Lory *Eos histrio*. Education work took place in three broad areas: communities, local government and schools.

Community meetings were held in nine villages on the island about the conservation of *Eos histrio*. Each was attended by approximately 100 people. Following these meetings, five villages wrote letters to the Regent of Sangihe and Talaud, requesting an area law be passed to protect *Eos histrio*. These letters were personally delivered to the Regent by the Action Sampiri team. Meetings with bird trappers were made in the six main trapping villages on Karakelang, to attempt to find a solution to the problem of unsustainable trapping of birds on the island. A senior trapper from Tuabatu village joined Action Sampiri for six weeks, becoming an integral member of the conservation education team.

A seminar about the conservation needs of Red and Blue Lory *Eos histrio* for local government officials was held in Beo, capital of the Talaud Islands, in February 1997. This was attended by district councillors, village heads and representatives of the police, the army and education department officials. We discussed the conservation of Red and Blue Lory *Eos histrio* and possible solutions, asking for opinions and ideas from local people. Action Sampiri met with the government head of all four districts on Karakelang Island, and with the Regent of Sangihe and Talaud to discuss conservation of the islands' endemic birds, particularly *Eos histrio*. We are working towards the implementation of a law that would ban any trade in, or trapping of, Red and Blue Lory *Eos histrio*.

Finally, talks about Red and Blue Lory *Eos histrio* and its conservation were given to almost 2,000 pupils in 16 schools. Some children were invited to join the project, learn some basic birdwatching skills and experience our work first-hand.

With the bird trade being a specific threat to the islands' endangered parrots, Action Sampiri also undertook some work in the provincial capital of North Sulawesi, Manado. Specifically, we worked with undergraduates from Universitas Sam Ratulangi and in total 12 students joined the project as counterpart scientists. We organised a birdwatching training workshop for local students at Tongkaina, just outside Manado, on 20th - 22nd December 1996. Twenty-five students attended the three day event, four later joining the project on Talaud for two weeks. We introduced students to the basics of bird identification, provided training in making field notes, using binoculars and other aspects of fieldcraft, and provided a focal point for students from different institutes to meet and discuss birdwatching.

Action Sampiri also worked with local media. We made three, two hour appearances on the local *Radio Smart FM's* Golden Age chat show broadcast over Manado, Bitung and Minahasa. An article about Action Sampiri's project on Sangihe and Talaud appeared in the *Manado Post* newspaper in October 1996.

Did our approach work? In just six months we did not expect to see major changes on Sangihe and Talaud, but we have laid strong foundations for future work. In all villages, without exception, we were afforded great hospitality and our project was greeted with enthusiasm and interest. It is almost impossible to measure 'progress' in a project of this nature, but communities living adjacent to Mt Sahengbalira have passed village laws banning the further clearance of primary forest; trappers from Tuabatu are thought to have significantly reduced capture rates of Red and Blue Lories and in April 1997, Action Sampiri were able to present the head of government on Sangihe-Talaud with letters from seven village and district heads calling for the implementation of a law banning trade in Red and Blue Lories. Such progress was made possible by an interaction of factors: a knowledge of the islands and their people, gained in 1995, was vital; the combination of UK students, students from the local university in Manado and local people was very effective, all groups learning much from each other during the project; closely combining our research and awareness programmes gave great credibility to the data we presented in village meetings and an ability to adapt to local work patterns, accepting bureaucratic formalities as necessary, benefited our work in the long-term. But of paramount importance was the willingness of local people to listen, absorb information, question our statements and take positive action. The conservation problems we are trying to address were created inadvertently by the islands' residents, it is clear to us that they should be part of the solution.

Plans are now being developed for a return to Sangihe and Talaud as the situation on these islands, particularly with respect to the over exploitation of the Red and Blue Lory, is changing rapidly and despite the successes enjoyed by Action Sampiri, the future of all endangered species on the islands is far from secure.

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