

Wangi-Wangi Island Trip Report - December 2020

By Jochen Menner, Curator of Birds / Prigen Conservation Breeding Ark

This is trip report to Wangi-Wangi Island which took place from 20 to 29 December 2020, with special notes on Wangi-Wangi White-eye and Yellow-Crested Cockatoo.

The purpose of this trip was mainly private leisure over the holidays, nevertheless, potentially valuable insights into the status of local endemic avifauna have been gained.

Upon arriving on the island in the afternoon, a short trip around Patuno Wakatobi Resort, in the North of the island was undertaken. Species like Sahul Sunbird (*Cinnyris clementiae infrenatus*), Hair-crested Drongo (*Dicrurus leucops leucops*), and Wakatobi White-eye (*Zosterops flavissimus*) appeared to be abundant. Other species like Island Monarch (*Monarcha cinerascens commutatus*) Black-naped Oriol (*Oriolus chinensis celebensis*) were also seen without difficulty.



White-eyes are minute and can be hard to locate when you do not know that to look and listen for. Here the Wakatobi white-eye also a recently discovered species which seem to be more widespread on Wangi-Wangi and surrounding islands.

The second day was used for a general exploration of the island. It became obvious right away that the habitat on Wangi-Wangi was highly degraded. In large parts of the island larger trees were completely absent and replaced by shrubs and along the coast by coconut palms. Similarly striking was the grade of “urbanization” of the island. Settlements stretched nearly along the entire coastline, where there was no village there was usually at least some agriculture. Wangi-Wangi island was remarkably well equipped with infrastructure, roads did not only stretch along the perimeter of the island, but also did

across its interior in multiple ways. Some of the roads seemed to have just been constructed quite recently and were in parts unfinished and were not yet displayed on Google Maps.

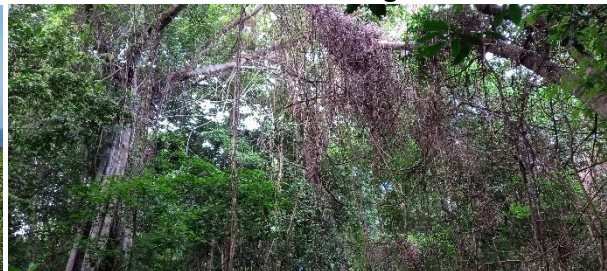
During the second day, the first trip to the only remaining forest patch on Wangi-Wangi was undertaken/conducted. Located just south of the airport, this patch of forest measured about 1km² and stretched from the coastal area inland. The main road and a number of small paths ran through it. Just on the forest edge, possibly a Wangi-Wangi White-eye



(*Zosterops sp. novum*) was encountered. This was only an acoustic encounter, without visual confirmation. Among other species, a number of Black-naped Fruit-doves (*Ptilinopus melanospilus melanauchen*) and Grey-cheeked Green-pigeons (*Treron griseicauda wallacei*) were observed.

New roads across the interior of the small island of Wangi-Wangi

The following days were spent exploring the island, usually by motorbike. Each day several hours were spent for bird watching. While crisscrossing the island, virtually every group of larger trees was investigated, some several times during different times of the day. Commonly encountered bird communities consisted of Wakatobi White-Eye, Sahul Sunbird, Island Monarch and Grey-sided Flowerpecker (*Dicaeum celebicum kuehni*). Wangi-Wangi White-eyes were never observed apart from the single observation in the forest patch. It was also absent even in the upland gardens which featured good numbers of old trees. The Wakatobi White-eye, on the contrary, was virtually omnipresent on the Island and seemed to present in basically any type of habitat and was often encountered in larger flocks.



Most of the island of Wangi-Wangi consist of degraded habitat with far between the few older trees. There is a single patch of remaining forest which is threatened by development plans.

On the fifth day, a decision was taken to learn more about another local endemic species, Yellow-crested Cockatoo (*Cacatua sulphurea paulandrewi*). In order to do so, a trip to Komponaone Island, off the southern coast of Wangi-Wangi was undertaken. Komponaone measure about 12.5 km² and is uninhabited. No regular infrastructure exists on the island since it was only used by the fishermen for an occasional stopover. According to some local algae farmers, the island was formerly used for small scale agriculture mainly for corn,

cassava and mango. Recently, it seemed to be widely abandoned with only remnant patches of former fields being visible. The forest on Komponaone seemed more extensive and to be of better quality than the ones on Wangi-Wangi. The island was visited on two different locations and both had dense vegetation in common.

Cockatoos were encountered on two occasions. First, in the east of the island a single individual was heard giving alarm calls and flying off. Later on, further to the east two individuals were seen at a relatively short distance but flew off as soon as they became aware of human presence. A third Cockatoo was heard nearby. All individuals were clearly very alert and took flight as soon as humans approached.

Accounts by some locals indicated that Cockatoos had or are still raiding small scale corn fields on the islands and might even come close to people in doing so. No indication for that kind of behavior could be observed though. A local algae farmer said that cockatoos and other birds were not specifically hunted on Komponaone; nevertheless, he also acknowledged that nestlings were taken from nests and sold as pets. On the islands itself, snare traps, presumably set for Orange-footed Scrubfowl (*Megapodius reinwardt reinwardt*) were found during the visit.



Up until this day, no sightings of Wangi-Wangi White-eye took place either on Komponaone or Wangi-Wangi. Since all previous observation efforts took place in a time frame between 8:00am and 6:00pm, an initiative was made to start the observation early in the morning.

One day before departing from the island, an observation was conducted early in the morning. Around 6:00AM, and a small group of Wangi-Wangi White-eyes could finally be properly observed. This observation was followed by another group about 30 minutes later. All these birds, roughly 30 in total, were seen within the forest patch around the airport, venturing from the highest canopy down to about 4m of height. The White-eyes were not particularly shy and fairly easy to observe while searching for food in the dense tangles of vines. A number of other birds, such as Island Flycatcher, Wakatobi White-eye and Flowerpecker were observed alongside with the Wangi-Wangi White-eyes. In several interviews with locals, there was an impression that the knowledge about the local avifauna among them was very limited. For example, the accounts mentioned by the locals regarding the description of the birds that were all smaller, flower visiting birds (Flowerpecker, White-

eyes, Sunbird) were called by the same local name and differentiations were not made or only on a very general level, such as yellow versus blackish.

On one occasion, there was an encounter with a young boy who was observed playing under a tree that was a roost of *Pteropus* sp. Fruitbats. From a small conversation with him mentioning about the bats on the tree, it could be concluded that the child was completely unaware of the presence of the bats and any bats in general. The same applied for the passing by crows, which he knew no name of.

On the other hand, some local residents were very aware of the general decline of all birds on Wangi-Wangi island. Poaching was considered a minor issue since locals would not catch birds and only Javanese would have occasionally done some bird catching. One algae farmer



Blue-tailed Imperial-pigeons in the canopy of the forest on Komponaone island.

clearly mentioned that the use of pesticides was the culprit for the demise of birds. He was even able to connect the introduction of pesticides and the decline of birds in a historical view, both started around 2005.

Conclusions:

Wangi-Wangi White-eye:

To preserve this highly distinct taxon in the wild, a comprehensive study about its ecological needs seems to be a critical priority.

Focal questions would be, how forest dependent the species really is and why nearby islands like Komponaone are not inhabited by the species even though the habitat seems at least as suitable as the one on Wangi-Wangi.

If it is true that the species depends solely on forest for its survival, the patch of forest at the airport must have highest conservation priority. A possible expansion of the airport might very well eradicate a large portion of the remaining habitat.

Yellow-Crested Cockatoo:

The Cockatoo seems to be only surviving on Komponaone Island. That the island is uninhabited is most certainly the main reason why the Cockatoo survived there. Any kind of human encroachment on the island, such as felling of bigger trees and slash and burn agriculture, might very well cause the extinction of the local subspecies. Hence, Komponaone should receive more attention regarding conservation actions. Since the local human population of Wangi-Wangi Island seems to be comparably well situated in terms of economy, there seems to be no imminent need to exploit the remaining nature to secure survival. This might be a good base for a local education and awareness program, targeting mainly children to enhance their pride for the unique local fauna.

All images: Jochen Menner

Trip participants: Adyah Ningtyas and Jochen Menner

This trip financing: Jochen Menner