

Sulawesi 7-13<sup>th</sup> of October 2009

By Peter Ericsson

As a youngster I would often find myself looking at the map of the world. I would dream and wonder what these mystical names and places would be like.

Throughout my competitive years of swimming I did get to travel in Europe and North-America but somehow I wanted more.

A job on a cruise liner in my late teen years took me around the world but with limited time in each place.

As a missionary I have experienced the wonders of Eastern cultures, people and places but primarily so in Thailand.

My ever growing passion for birds and birding has again enhanced my desire to visit places.

With the fantastic airline Airasia operating extensively in SEA many new doors have now opened.

I asked Stijn de Win from [www.birding2asia.com](http://www.birding2asia.com) if he wanted to join me for a week to Sulawesi and he did.

It quickly became very clear that things would go a lot smoother by using a local tour operator. We contacted [www.sulawesi-lw-adventures.com](http://www.sulawesi-lw-adventures.com) which is run by Theo Henoeh. This was no mistake. The trip was excellently organized from A to Z. Theo and driver, Roi, were right there at the airport taking good care of everything. And that at a very reasonable and affordable price.

We arrived in the evening after having changed flight in Kuala Lumpur. First night we lodged in Manado. The hotel was located on a hill surrounded with greenery and overlooking the bay and city.



Our first taste of Indonesian cuisine was enjoyed with Bintang (Star) pilsner and then we headed to our air-conditioned room.

## Day 1

Early morning at the hotel didn't hold any surprises except for my first new birds: **Uniform Swiftlet** and **Chestnut Munias**. From the balcony we also saw **Lesser Coucal, Glossy Swiftlet, Olive-backed Sunbird, Spotted Dove and Sooty-headed Bulbuls**.

Manado is located in the very North of Sulawesi. The region is called Minahasa and most of the population is Christian. We saw many a church along the road.



We started on our way to Gunung Ambang about 4 hours drive from Manado. The road is paved but only has 2 lanes. I soon found out that Indonesians love to use the horn. Lots of people, vehicles and bends in the road make this habit understandable. Theo's van was strong, comfortable and skillfully driven by Roi.



After about an hour or 40 kilometers out of town we stopped by a river. From the roadside we saw: **Barred Rail, Slender-billed Crow, Black-faced Munias, Collared Kingfisher, Common Sandpiper, and Sulawesi Hanging Parrot** but best of all was a flock of nicely colored **Grosbeak Starlings**.

Sulawesi is mainly mountainous and covered in palm oil and coconut plantations. A blessing to some and a curse to others.

A visit to a smaller town for some local coffee was interesting. It was frequented by only men who I can only assume were overdoing it on the local 'java'. (which, by the way, is very good!)

We stocked up on Guinness Stout and Bintang to last us for the coming 3 days. One has to be prepared!



Another stop came when we entered a mixed deciduous covered hill. New species kept coming: A pair of **Barred Sulawesi Honey-Buzzards**, **Superb Fruit Dove**, **Grey-sided Flowerpecker**, **Black-fronted White-eyes** and **Yellow-sided Flowerpeckers** was all lifers for me.

The small village Ambang is where we stayed. A ranger's home were where we were to reside the next couple of nights.

As we drove through the village we caused no small stir. The word for a white man is 'bolay' in Indonesian and was to become a familiar sound. Otherwise Indonesians love to greet you with 'Mister'. Very friendly people. Little kids were playing with discarded bicycle tires, flying kites and playing with marbles. So different from the regular city kid and all their high-tech gadgets.





The ranger's house was basic and the room at best simple. But it was clean and the food was prepared with a lot of love and was abundant.

The afternoon was spent birding on Gunung Ambang. (Gunung means mountain).

The secondary/cultivated area next to the forest held a lot of birds and using a scope is a necessity. Most of the bird calls were new to me but a few familiar ones were around even though not exactly the same. For instance Black-filled Koel sounds similar to Asian Koel. Sooty-headed Bulbul the same. Olive-backed Sunbird the same. Bay Coucal sounds like Greater Coucal. Many parrot species sounds just like that: parrots.



**Spotted Kestrel, Black Kite, Sulawesi Pygmy Hanging Parrot, Sulawesi Pygmy Woodpecker, Slender-billed Cuckoo Dove, Fire-browed Starlings, Grey-streaked Flycatcher, Yellow-billed Malkoha, Spot-tailed Goshawk** (superb bird) and **White-bellied Imperial Pigeons** all were new for the trip.

As the night fell we stayed on for Owls. A few years back research was done in this area and a ‘new to science’ owl was found. Here it is now pretty common and it wasn’t long before we laid eyes on **Cinnabar Boobook**. We also saw **Speckled Boobook** and heard **Sulawesi Masked Owl** and **Sulawesi Scops Owl**.

Many **Great Eared Nightjars** added to the sounds of the night.

Day 2

Gunung Ambung holds some difficult birds. It wasn’t till later on I realized this. Because just about everything was new to us we were happy getting to know the more common species. Thus we didn’t enter the more prime forest until a bit late the following morning and in spite of trying hard for **Scaly Kingfisher** and **Matinan Flycatcher** we did not succeed.

We did succeed in getting another set of endemic birds though and simply getting to know these new species was a joy in itself. Added species from

the day before was **Purple-bearded Bee-eater** (a bird many go to Lore Lindu to see), **Sulawesi Blue Flycatcher** ( a split from Mangrove blue?), **Yellow and Green Lorikeet**, **Sulawesi Myzomela**, **Rusty-flanked Fantail**, **Ornate Lorikeet**, **Sulphur-bellied Whistler**, **White-bellied Imperial Pigeon**, **Black-billed Koel**, **Sulawesi Cicada bird**.



Purple-bearded Bee-eater



Sulawesi Scops Owl

The afternoon was set to visit the Tambon village. Ambang and Tambun are both located in a huge valley in the central part of Minahassa. We had to drive 50km to get to it and it took a long time on this small road full of local people, vehicles and potholes.

This is one of only a couple of known sites for Maleo, a megapode. The area has hot springs which makes it suitable for these birds to lay their eggs in the hot ground.

We were welcomed by Max, a ranger working to help conserve the breeding grounds. Max opened the gate for us and eagerly full of expectations we followed along the trail.

Before we got on to any **Maleos** we saw our first **Green Imperial Pigeons**. The form in Sulawesi has purple/pink hairs on the neck which help to make them very different from what I am used to in Thailand. Surely these must be rewarded with their own status one day.

We did see 2 Maleos, both high up in trees. The birds come down to courtship and to lay their eggs but take to the trees when alarmed.

Max has opened his home as a Home Stay. We were treated to a room each. His wife cooked some delicious food. The chicken was local produce and not the normal steroid induced produce we are used to from home.

Some local chili sauces



Max speaks good English and knows his birds well. So does Theo who only fairly recently has picked up on birding. Theo knows the calls and whereabouts of the more sought after species such as Owls and Kingfishers but yet has space to learn more about the common birds.

Day 3

We were in for an exciting morning. The Maleo site is next to a forested hillside. A good deal of time was spent scanning any movements in the early morning. This revealed a number of new things. **Red-knobbed Hornbills** in the distance, **Black-naped Fruit-Dove** (what a wonderful bird this is), **Maroon-chinned Fruit-Dove**, **Grey-cheeked Green Pigeons** (a common treron), **Sulawesi Triller**, **Ivory-backed Wood Swallows** (they seem to like forested habitat more than White-breasted), a female **Ashy Woodpecker**, **Black-naped Oriole**, **Yellow-billed Malkoha**, **Bay Coucal**, **Spangled Drongo**, **Pale-blue Monarch**, a pair of excellent **White-necked Mynas**,

our first **Green-backed Kingfishers** and at last my long longed for **Red-bellied Pitta!**



Red-bellied Pitta

Tonight's dinner was prepared from Sulawesi pork. Nothing like the industrially produced stuff I am used to. They went out of their way to cook for us as the locals mainly eat fish and vegetables. We were treated very well.

Off we went to a place called Toraut. Here we were quickly shown a Speckled Owl roosting in an abandoned building. We then proceeded to cross a river on a bamboo raft. Entering a healthy looking forest we started looking and listening for things. Our first **Blue-backed Parrots**, a **Purple Needletail** and then a group of 3 **Sulawesi Dwarf Hornbills**. These birds are simply beautiful and seem to have more yellow in the face then depicted in the fieldguide!

**Yellow-breasted Raquet-tail** was my first species of this family. **Silver-tipped Imperial Pigeons** showed well. An immature **Sulawesi Hawk Eagle** gave us identification headaches. Then the night fell and owling began.

Armed with tapes and torches our team of 6 stayed alert. First to show was **Sulawesi Masked Owl** high in a tree. Then a closer look of **Sulawesi Scops Owl** followed but not the **Ochre-bellied Boobooks** we were after.



Speckled Boobook

Day 4.

A drive to Tapakolintang, part of Dumoga-bone National Park, and some healthy looking lower hill forest. Here we walked along the road and saw many a stunning **Red-knobbed Hornbills**. **Black-naped Fruit Dove** came close. My only **Black Sunbird** was welcomed.

Our first pair of **Purple-winged Rollers** was perching in the open. These Rollers are a lot less common than our Indian Roller and seem to prefer more primary forest.

**Sulawesi Cicadabird, 3 Sulawesi Dwarf Kingfishers, a Common Kingfisher, my only Crimson-crowned Flowerpecker, Sulawesi Hanging Parrot, and a pair of White-collared Mynas** were other noteworthy birds.



Stijn, Theo, Peter and Max

After the morning's birding we spent 6 hours driving to Tangkoko. A sumptuous dinner in a nice restaurant was a welcomed break.



We settled in at Mama Roos Home Stay. It acts more as a Guesthouse. That homey feeling from the previous two Home Stays simply was not there. The first night was unbearably hot as we had spent the first few days in cool and pleasant temperatures on higher ground. I pointed out the need for another fan and it got worked out. The foul smell from the sink never went away. There is an upscale resort under construction a couple of kilometers away. Mama Roos need to upgrade her set up a bit if she wants to stay competitive.

The best part of Mama Roos is Samuel, the guide. At 40, he is still very youthful in heart and spirit along with a good sense of humor. He knows his birds very well so Theo left us in Samuels's care for a couple of nights.



Day 5.

Birding starts right at the Guest house. Crossing the bridge a pair of **Blue-eared Kingfishers** appeared. Later on I had a brilliant **Ruddy Kingfisher** at the same place on a few occasions.

We decided to walk into the park through some secondary forest, scrub and grasslands and then on into the more prime forest. This walkway is not more than 100m from the ocean. The volcanic mountain Gunung Tongkoko is overlooking the village and has been part of creating a rich soil I suppose.

**Black Pigeon** was our first endemic lifer. Not that easy to find. Plenty of **Grosbeak Starlings**. **Green-backed Kingfisher** was almost tame allowing for close photography. Same with **Lilac-cheeked Kingfisher**. The latter always in the shade but revealing some extraordinary colors when photographed with a flash.



A pair of **Isabelline Bush Hen** was a bird I really wanted to see and here they were.

A surprise **Tabon Scrubfowl** roomed the leaf litter. No need to go looking for this one on the islands outside of Kota Kinabalu anymore.

My only real target bird for the trip was **Red-bellied Pitta**. Samuel knew where a pair was and it didn't take long for them to respond to his whistles. The birds were confiding and I was able to mesmerize myself in these longed for birds.

The lovely decorated **Red-backed Thrush** was around in here as well. Not that hard to see but difficult to photograph as it kept its distance and stayed on the move.

Other note worthy birds seen were: **Red-knobbed Hornbills, Sulawesi Babbler, Green and Silver-tipped Imperial Pigeons, Slender-billed Cuckoo Dove, White-rumped Cuckoo Shrike, Bay Coucals and Pale-blue Monarch (Black-naped).**

A long walk back to Mama Roos and lunch. We then insisted on using motorbikes to take us back inside the forest. Samuel and friend willingly complied.

One of the afternoon targets was to visit the well known site for roosting Spectral Tarsiers. These incredible little animals roost inside the tree trunk but come out an hour before dusk and stay about till they disappear inside the forest. They didn't seem to be bothered by the tourists and many camera flashes going off.



We also had a single Sulawesi Black Crested Macaque. These are

endangered primates restricted to Northern Sulawesi. Muscular and impressive looking animals they are indeed.

We stayed in the forest for some owling. A **Sulawesi Scops Owl** came very close but quickly took off. We heard **Ochre-bellied Boobook** but didn't see any other species.

Day 5.

Samuel had promised that 'money back if you don't see the **Ochre-bellied Boobook** in daylight', A pretty bold statement, but one which came true as we ventured out first thing in the early morning.



Ochre-bellied Boobooks

Samuel also managed to track down a **Pied Cuckoo Shrike** which was our new bird for the morning. **Sulawesi Dwarf Kingfisher** was extremely confiding and some nice pictures were obtained.



Sulawesi Dwarf Kingfisher

A bit after lunch we casually walked down to the beach where we bordered a narrow boat. It was interesting to see the many floating fishing contraptions along the coast as we headed towards the mangroves.

Once at the mangroves the engine was turned off and we continued by paddle.

Gliding through the quiet waters with high expectations of seeing **Black-billed Kingfisher**. Some familiar birds were encountered along the way: **Pink-necked Pigeon, Collared Kingfisher**, our first **Sacred Kingfisher**, **Common Sandpiper, Lesser Sand Plover, Pacific Reef Heron, Little Heron, Whiskered, White-winged, Little and Great Crested Terns. Brahmy Kite, Osprey and White-bellied Fish Eagle** as well. Best of all a few **Lesser Frigatebirds**.

We had to go very deep inside the mangroves to find our birds. A pair is residing in here.

It was a relief to both of us having gotten our bird as we had missed the mandatory **Sulawesi Masked Owls** perched on some cliffs.



Black-billed Kingfisher

On the way back we passed some simple dwellings but I couldn't help but think how much happier a lifestyle these simple fishermen have than us city dwellers.

Though there were many a fishing contraption out there, there was no 'clean sweep' as so often done by commercial huge trawlers purely out there for monetary gain.

Day 7.

This, our last day, we decided to do a little differently. Stijn walked with Samuel deeper inside the forest searching for **Crested Myna**. I wanted to see **Red-bellied Pitta** again so teamed up with Theo who had come back from Manado. The Pitta didn't disappoint, neither did **Red-backed Thrush** but best of all, a **Stephen's Dove** on the ground. I also managed to get some shots of **Yellow-billed Malkhoa**. They are hard to get in the lens as they move about so much and like to stay inside the foliage. A very handsome male **Ashy WP** showed but no time to use the camera.

Stijn didn't get the Myna but added **Pygmy Sulawesi Hanging Parrot** and **Stephen's Dove** as well.

Other birds this morning were **Blue-backed Parrot**, **Bright-headed Cisticola**, **Yellow-breasted Raquet Tails** flew by. Many **Sulawesi Swiftlets** (Moluccan) feeding in the air was another lifer. **Green-backed**, **Lilac-cheeked** and **Ruddy Kingfisher** also showed well.

As we drove away from Tongkoko we did a quick stop at a hill side. Here Theo had previously seen **Sulawesi Myna** and sure enough there was one present. Our last lifer!

Add to that a splendid **Sulawesi Dwarf Hornbill** (our only 2<sup>nd</sup> sighting) and we left very satisfied.

The ride back in a nice saloon Toyota went without problems and we arrived at the airport with plenty of time to spare.

I heartily recommend Theo as your tour operator. Don't know why anyone would use anyone else to be honest. All the people we were in contact with were genuine with no pretense or need to be showy.

Stijn was a great companion and his scope, skills and easy going ways helped to enhance my birding experience.

Total birds seen: 119

Lifers: 68

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[www.pbase.com/peterericsson/birds\\_of\\_sulawesi\\_indonesia](http://www.pbase.com/peterericsson/birds_of_sulawesi_indonesia)

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