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Papua New Guinea Birding Tour

14 DAY/ 13 NIGHT TOUR

OVERVIEW

Since the BBC's legendary filmmaker David Attenborough made "*Attenborough in Paradise*", no birder has been able to watch this documentary without feeling compelled to visit the legendary island of New Guinea.

The eastern half of the island of New Guinea, in the southwestern Pacific ocean just north of Australia, is part of the Oceanic country of Papua New Guinea. The western half forms the Indonesian provinces of Papua and West Papua.

Papua New Guinea is one of the most culturally diverse countries in the world. It is also one of the most rural, as only 18 per cent of its people live in urban centres. Most of the population of just over 8 million live in customary communities. The country is one of the world's least explored, culturally and geographically. It is known to have numerous groups of uncontacted peoples, and researchers believe there are many undiscovered species of plants and animals in the interior.

To prove that birding is all that matters here, the shape of New Guinea island is often compared to that of a bird-of-paradise, and this results in the usual names for the two extremes of the island: the Bird's Head Peninsula in the northwest, and the Bird's Tail Peninsula in the southeast. A spine of east-west mountains, the New Guinea Highlands, dominates the geography of the island, stretching over 1,600 km (1,000 mi) from the 'head' to the 'tail' of the island. The western half of the island contains the highest mountains in Oceania, rising up to 4,884 m (16,024 ft) high at Puncak Jaya, ensuring a steady supply of rain from the equatorial atmosphere.

New Guinea contains many of the world's ecosystem types: glacial, alpine tundra, savanna, montane and lowland rainforest, mangroves, wetlands, lake and river ecosystems, seagrasses, and some of the richest coral reefs on the planet. These varied habitats support equally varied avifauna! New Guinea has an immense biodiversity, containing between 5 and 10 percent of the total species on the planet. This percentage is about the same amount as that found in the United States or Australia! A high percentage of New Guinea's species are endemic, and thousands are still unknown to science: probably well over 200,000 species of insect and between 11,000 and 20,000 plant species.

Undoubtedly one of the highest priorities on any world birder's agenda, reality does not disappoint on New Guinea, and the star-studded cast of quality birds is overwhelming. While headlined by many species of incredible birds-of-paradise, the quality does not stop there; the average tour

yields jewel-babblers slinking away in the undergrowth, incredible golden and black whistlers, superbly plumaged parrots, gaudy parakeets, rowdy cockatoos, bizarre bowerbirds, exquisite fairywrens, and a gorgeous suite of multi-colored doves and impressive kingfishers.

Although New Guinea is listed as the world's second largest island (after Greenland), in reality it is best thought of as an island-continent. One of the last places on earth to be explored by Europeans, this wild island supports over 700 bird species, and nearly half of them are endemic.

Birding this island is very challenging; from trying to spot the shy, skulking forest birds to dealing with the occasional logistical difficulties, but the rewards more than compensate in this must-see 'dream' destination. This trip covers only the eastern part of the island, i.e. it takes place entirely in the country of Papua New Guinea.

DAILY SUMMARY

DAY 1	Arrival in Port Moresby
DAY 2	Port Moresby to Kiunga
DAY 3	Fly and Elevala Rivers
DAY 4	Fly and Elevala Rivers
DAY 5	Tabubil
DAY 6	Tabubil
DAY 7	Tabubil, flight to Mount Hagen, drive to Kumul Lodge
DAY 8	Kumul Lodge
DAY 9	Kumul Lodge
DAY 10	Kumul Lodge
DAY 11	Kumul Lodge to Makara Bird View Lodge (Tari)
DAY 12	Tari to Port Moresby
DAY 13	Varirata National Park
DAY 14	Departing from Port Moresby

DETAILED DAILY ITINERARY

DAY 1: Arrival in Port Moresby

After our international flight, we will arrive in at Jacksons International Airport just outside Port Moresby. It is the capital and largest city of Papua New Guinea and the largest city in the South Pacific outside of Australia and New Zealand. It is located on the shores of the Gulf of Papua, on the south-western coast of the Papuan Peninsula of the island of New Guinea. The place where the city was founded has been inhabited by the Motu-Koitabu people for centuries. The first Briton to see it was Captain John Moresby in 1873. It was named in honour of his father, Admiral Sir Fairfax Moresby.

We'll have some time in the afternoon to bird the campus of the nearby Pacific Adventist University. The bush and scrub here has a distinctly 'Aussie' feel, with open woodlands of *Eucalyptus* gum trees being the dominant habitat. The birding also feels quite Australian, with key species being those only found elsewhere in the northern-most recesses of Cape York Peninsula. Our main targets will be Fawn-breasted Bowerbird and Black-backed Butcherbird, which fortunately are both quite common here. However, when the ponds are holding water we should rack up a bunch of great waterbirds including Comb-crested Jacana, and the endemic Spotted Whistling Duck, amongst the Green Pygmy Geese, Anhingas, and cormorants. The open scrub around campus should provide our first New Guinea endemics, such as Brown Oriole, Yellow-faced Myna or Gray-headed Munia. However, the highlight of the day for some could be finding a Papuan Frogmouth that usually roosts somewhere on campus.

We return to Port Moresby and our comfortable hotel to prepare for the wilds of the Kiunga area.

DAY 2: Port Moresby to Kiunga

This morning we will return to the airport for our 3 hour long flight to the northwest, heading to Kiunga, a port town on the Fly River. We will check into our hotel in the heart of mining country. Local industry rests on a cornerstone of freight and haulage, particularly from the Ok Tedi Mine (an open-pit copper and gold mine) and provisioning for the much larger town of Tabubil. Natural rubber has been an emerging industry more recently, with a processing/manufacturing plant being built in town.

Ironically, much of the infrastructure we use to travel in the country is driven by the mining industry and this will be our first of several encounters with "gold towns". This is Fly River country, on the boundary between lowland forest and grassland savanna. While the highlands tend to get all the headlines, Kiunga provides some of the very best Papuan birding with many breathtaking lowland forest bird species, including several that are rare and poorly known.

We start our exploration of this region with an afternoon sortie to a site simply known as kilometer 17. This is where David Attenborough and his BBC crew ascended into the canopy in harnesses and filmed the display tree of the Greater Bird-of-paradise. Not long after alighting from the vehicle

we will hear the nasal honkings of these superb creatures, but we may well have to wait until later in the afternoon to see one in display. However, the sight of this, our probable first bird-of-paradise, will not be easily forgotten as they throw their heads forward, elevating the gold plumes on their backs, and perform a pogo-dance jump to attract the attention of potential mates.

While waiting for this incredible treat we should see birds crossing the canopy including dainty Red-cheeked Parrots and Orange-breasted Fig Parrots which fly incessantly to and fro. A less remarkable bird-of-paradise, the strange Trumpet Manucode, can also often be found at this site. We might even see the less common Raggiana Birds-of-paradise also displaying in a double-whammy spectacle. There is also a small trail in this area, and we will explore it at various times to search for some forest interior birds. Specifically, we'll be listening for the incredible Blue Jewel-babbler. This bird seems like a cross between a rail and a babbler, and it slinks along the ground incredibly stealthily. If given the luxury of good views, the royal blue emphasizes the crisp white throat, which remains amazingly well hidden in the undergrowth. We will need considerable luck to see this gem along with the surprisingly shy Hook-billed Kingfisher, which is frequently heard but seldom seen.

More likely quarry include the amazing Rufous-bellied Kookaburra, Golden Monarch, Boyer's and Black Cuckoo-shrikes (two of eight endemic cuckoo-shrikes that we may encounter on this tour) and the amazingly dapper and elegant Lowland Peltops, a black-and-white creature that fortunately sits exposed on the canopy's highest branches. A fruiting tree might also reveal the first of many dazzling pigeons we are likely to see on tour, with this area being particularly good for Pink-spotted Fruit Dove and Purple-tailed Imperial Pigeon.

We will return to Kiunga for the night.

DAY 3 & 4: Fly and Elevela Rivers

We have the better part of the next two days to explore the marvelous array of birding opportunities that abound on the Fly and Elevela rivers. We will need to be up early on both mornings to maximize our time on these rivers, as we make our way upstream into the thicker recesses of one of the wildest forested areas remaining in New Guinea.

It won't be long before we are enveloped in new birds, and side trips along these rivers offer large numbers of Collared and Pinon's Imperial Pigeons. The outlandish Palm Cockatoos screech as they fly over the river and we are likely to be swamped by huge numbers of Blyth's Hornbills in our first morning. The amazingly dimorphic Eclectus Parrots, with the female being the remarkable crimson-and-blue, will also leave a lasting memory.

We will stakeout key areas for display grounds for two of New Guinea's most remarkable birds-of-paradise; the pole-dancing Twelve-wired Bird-of-paradise and the elegant and spectacular crimson and snow-white King Bird-of-paradise, replete with tail-streamers of coiled green ribbon. We will need a bit of luck to find some of other more reclusive denizens of the river's edge, but we will spend much time looking for the remarkable Vulture-like Pesquet's Parrots, immense and overwhelming Southern Crowned-Pigeons (the largest in the world and the size of a turkey) as well as the noisy endemic White-bellied Pitohui.

We will work a few trails where the birding gets a little tougher, but hopefully we will see some of the quality residents including Common Paradise-Kingfisher, Hook-billed Kingfisher, the incredible Hooded and Blue-breasted Pittas, Spot-winged and Black-faced Monarchs, Emperor Fairywren and Black-sided Robin. Fruiting trees may reveal Dwarf or Beautiful Fruit Dove, Great Cuckoo-Dove or Black-capped Lories.

However, even if we have seen most of these incredible birds, the *coup-de-grace* may yet be to come. Some enterprising members of a village along the river have learned that there is more to be gained in protecting birds, and they have found an excellent way to get unrivalled views of the incredible gold-and-orange Flame Bowerbird. We may have to sit in hides for a while, but we will hope to see this bird displaying at the bower. In the past, this was a sight few other birders have been privileged to witness, with views of flying birds being regarded as a success.

DAY 5 & 6: Tabubil

After breakfast on the fifth day of our trip, we will drive north for about 2 hours to Tabubil, in the Ok Tedi Valley, set in the foothills of the Star Mountains. Tabubil, our home for 2 days, is set in extremely dense jungle fed by one of the highest rainfalls in the world. The town, with a current population of about 12 000, was established primarily to serve the mine of Ok Tedi.

Depending on what we still need we may make a few strategic stops in the lowlands en route. However, as we approach Tabubil, the rise in altitude will provide a whole new suite of enchanting possibilities. Our first stop will be for the *dubius* race of Little Ringed Plover that many shorebird experts regard as a distinct species.

However, the afternoon will be spent at one of the few accessible sites where we may get our first glimpse at one of the key birds in this area, the Magnificent Bird-of-paradise. The male is incredibly reclusive (unlike many others in the family) and it may take us some time to get decent looks, indeed in some years this species is missed altogether. However, we will also search for another very tricky bird-of-paradise here, Carola's Parotia. Our best chance to see these species is by staking out fruiting trees, in hopes that the birds approach to feed on them. However, in between the stake-outs, we should bump into a variety of new and different species including the frustratingly secretive White-bellied and Sooty Thicket-Fantails. Although fantails are usually easy to see elsewhere in the world, they are really tricky in New Guinea.

While we are watching the fruiting trees we might also see Fairy and Red-flanked Lorikeets and the diminutive Red-breasted Pygmy-Parrot. With luck we will hear the rare Doria's Hawk calling and we may even see one. We'll also keep an ear out for the melancholic call of the White-rumped Robin, which might reveal itself clasp to the side of a tree in characteristic style. Another stakeout will include the singing perches of the amazing Magnificent Riflebird.

Other excellent species resident here include White-eared Bronze-cuckoo, New Guinea Bronzewing, the powerfully built Stout-billed Cuckooshrike, the elegant Great Cuckoo-Dove, Spotted Honeyeater, and the recently-described and well-named Obscure Berrypecker. Mountain Peltops should be found sitting on their indistinct treetop nests. Other really secretive species that will require much patience and good fortune to see include Mountain Kingfisher, Northern Scrub-Robin, Chestnut-backed Jewel-babbler and Greater Melampitta. With an early

start one morning and a good dose of luck, we may also locate the immense, strange and crepuscular Shovel-billed Kookaburra.

DAY 7: Tabubil, flight to Mount Hagen, drive to Kumul Lodge

After breakfast (and some birding if time permits), we will transfer to the airport in Tabubil for the 2 hour eastward flight to Mount Hagen.

Mount Hagen, called *The Heart of the Highlands*, is the third largest city in Papua New Guinea, with a population of almost 50 000. It is the capital of the Western Highlands Province and is located in the large fertile Wahgi Valley at an elevation of 1,677 m (5,502 ft). The city is named after the old eroded volcano Mount Hagen, located about 24 kilometres (15 mi) to the northwest. The volcano was named after the German colonial officer Curt von Hagen.

Upon arrival in Mount Hagen we will drive about an hour to our superb base for the next three nights, Kumul Lodge.

DAY 8 to 10: Kumul Lodge

Kumul Lodge is exceptional, and in more than one sense. The birding in the grounds and surrounding areas is simply stunning. But the lodge also offers great service and comfortable rooms that make this sector of the tour feel decidedly luxurious. What is more, after the relatively hot and humid lowlands, the cool crisp air of the highlands offers a welcome respite. We will spend the next three days exploring the many treats that this varied mountainous area in Enga Province offers.

Our exploration will begin right in the lodge gardens, at the now world-famous feeding table. There are not many places in the world where you can see Birds-of-paradise from your room window, but Kumul Lodge is one of them! The strict wildlife protection policies of local landowners have resulted in many birds being incredibly tame, and Kumul attracts a host of confiding resident species. We are likely to see Belford's Melidectes, Smoky Honeyeater, Brehm's Tiger-Parrot, Papuan Lorikeet, Mountain Firetail, Red-collared Myzomela, and Black-backed and Black-throated Honeyeaters right in the garden. Also, the waxwing-like Crested Berrypecker, one representative of an endemic New Guinea family, is quite easy near the lodge.

Other superb treats nearby include Black-throated and White-rumped Robins, confiding Island Thrushes, and the glowing Regent Whistler. However, the feeding-table highlight comes in the form of the amazing Ribbon-tailed *Astrapia* (some males with full tail streamers measuring more than a meter) and Brown Sicklebill, two species of Bird-of-paradise practically on your windowsill. Night birding in the lodge grounds is no less impressive with both Mountain Nightjar and Mountain Owlet-Nightjar regular.

We will also have time to venture onto the great trails around the lodge and nearby areas for some of the others specialties though. Here we will seek out more BOPs including the spectacular long-tailed Stephanie's *Astrapia*, the golden-and-black Crested Bird-of-paradise, and the remarkable King-of-Saxony Bird-of-paradise, with his amazing ratcheted head feathers that twirl as he sings his

grating song from an elevated perch. However, recently, the Kumul area has been noted to hold yet another member of this spectacular family. We'll make a special effort to get up early to make it to the Lesser Bird-of-paradise display tree (voted the most remarkable spectacle of our last tour). Here we should see more than one male bouncing about the *Casuarinas* trees, calling and posing in a variety of ridiculous postures as he tries to outdo his competitors for the attention of the choosy females. Once we have managed to shut our own gaping mouths, we'll pay attention to some other special residents of this area including the Yellow-breasted Bowerbird, Ornate Melidectes and New Guinea White-eye.

There is more to the trail network, however, including some juicy Forest-Rails that we will keep a keen ear out for, as well as Orange-crowned Fairywren, Blue-capped Ifrita (one of the bizarre poisonous birds of New Guinea), Tit Berrypecker, Mountain Mouse-Warbler, several scrubwrens, myzomelas, and if we are lucky, the bizarre Wattled Ploughbill or beautiful Black-breasted Boatbill.

DAY 11: Kumul Lodge to Makara Bird View Lodge

We take a flight from Mt. Hagen to Tari, where the dramatic mountain scenery and spectacularly adorned Huli Wigmen will be an undoubted highlight.

We should have time for some late afternoon birding in the Tari gap.

We'll unfortunately only spend one night at our overnight accommodation, Makara Bird View Lodge. The lodge is built in the rainforest and is a superb birders and nature lovers' paradise. (If you want to extend this stay to the recommended 3 nights, we do offer an 18-day New Guinea tour. Contact us for more information.)

Please note: the Mt. Hagen to Tari flight is currently not operating. It may be necessary to fly to Tari via Port Moresby. If not we can take a hire vehicle and drive to Tari.

DAY 12: Tari to Port Moresby

Tari is especially rich in birds-of-paradise, and it is not unusual to record an incredible eight or more species in a day. The stunning birds are not the only attraction here, as Tari is also a culturally fascinating area.

After breakfast and morning birding we will transfer to the airport and fly to Port Moresby, just a little over an hour away.

We will spend the afternoon birding at a local mangrove area not too far from the city before settling into our comfortable hotel for the night.

DAY 13: Varirata National Park

Based near Port Moresby, we will work Varirata NP, about an hour's drive from our hotel.

This area is a great combination of open *Eucalyptus* scrub, *Cassuarina* woodland and some extensive scarp forest. Despite the close proximity of this park to the capital, it is largely under-visited and is frequently deserted aside from a few keen birders. We should find another bird-of-paradise: the 'Eastern' Riflebird (a split of Magnificent Riflebird).

However, the area can also be loaded with fruiting trees and we should hopefully score some of the excellent doves that frequent the area. One of the key target birds here is the amazing red-breasted Brown-headed Paradise Kingfisher. Fortunately, it is rather common here, and we have an excellent chance of seeing this bird.

Another highly sought-after species here is the strange Barred Owlet-Nightjar, which we will look for in several day-roost holes. We will also work the trails seeking out White-faced Robin perched sideways on liana tangles, stunning Yellow-billed Kingfishers, Yellow-legged Flycatchers, Black Berrypeckers, and nuthatch-like Buff-faced Pygmy-Parrots. Flocks may reveal Black-winged Monarch and Fairy Gerygone among some great New Guinea endemics such as Hooded and Rusty Pitohuis and the very handsome Chestnut-bellied Fantail. While we search through these flocks we will hope for another of Varirata's great specialties, the impressive Dwarf Whistler (Goldenface).

The savanna adjoining the forest holds Black-faced Cuckooshrike, Black Myzomela, Streak-headed Honeyeater and Blue-winged Kookaburra. As with other forested areas of New Guinea, this park is home to many extremely shy and skulking birds, including Black-billed Brushturkey, Painted Quail-thrush, White-eared Catbird, Pheasant Pigeon and Chestnut-backed Jewel-babbler, but it would be a red-letter day if we were to see more than one of these rarities.

After loading up on our final New Guinea endemics of the trip, we return to Port Moresby where we might stop off at fantastic arts and crafts store replete with masks, statues and vivid paintings that can be bought as memories of one of the greatest birding tours you have ever done.

DAY 14: Departing from Port Moresby

We will wake up early and bid Port Moresby farewell, before driving to the airport and jetting back to your country of origin.

End of tour.

TOUR INFORMATION:

CLIMATE: Hot and humid around Port Moresby and Kiunga. Generally pleasant in the mountains, but the early mornings at Kumul Lodge can be downright cold. Expect some rain, occasionally heavy.

DIFFICULTY: Most of the walking is easy, though there are some short, steep trails at Kumul. The birding is very challenging, but fortunately, the birds-of-paradise are usually not difficult to see.

ACCOMMODATION: At Kiunga and Tabubil, we'll stay in fairly good hotels with air conditioning. In Port Moresby, Kumul, accommodations are excellent. All accommodations have private bathrooms, hot water, and electricity. Makara Lodge is a fairly very basic lodge, but very pleasant staff and stunning surroundings make up for it.

Special notes for this tour:

It is quite likely that the final itinerary for this tour will be different from the one given above. Flight schedules in Papua New Guinea are complicated and ever-changing. Most flights only operate only on certain days of the week, and the itinerary above is based entirely on those schedules. We will monitor the situation, and adapt our itinerary as necessary. Flights can even change on a moment's notice based on weather conditions so last-minute modifications are also a distinct possibility.

Papua New Guinea is an underdeveloped country. While we endeavor to use the best providers possible, sub-par service (e.g. late drivers, uncomfortable or poorly-maintained vehicles, and fuel shortages, cancelled or redirected flights) can sometimes cause inconveniences to travelers. Every tour company running trips here has to deal with this, and we feel it is best to inform you beforehand, as it can be quite disconcerting considering the costs involved in visiting this country.

Thank you for choosing Nature Travel Birding.