

FATHER JILIS A. J. VERHEIJEN (1908 1997)

by

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Verheijen, Jilis Antonius Josephus. Born in Zevenaar 26 March, 1908 and died in Teteringen, The Netherlands, 25 April 1997 at the age of 89. He spent 58 of those years (1935–1993) in Manggarai, West Flores, in the province of East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia.

As a Roman Catholic Missionary of the Societas Verbi Divini (S.V.D.) Father J. Verheijen travelled to Flores in 1935 where he was based at Ruteng. From the beginning he took a keen interest in the Maunggarai language of West Flores, and as a technique to learn the language he collected myths, stories, and riddles, which were thoroughly documented in a series of reports. During the Second World War he was interned on Sulawesi. After the War he enlarged his interest, and succeeded in combining his scientific interest with his missionary work until 1959 when he concluded his pastoral duties. Father Verheijen led a diverse life, as a priest, an anthropologist, a birdwatcher, a botanist and linguist obviously with a sharp eye for, and love of, the natural world.

Perhaps he was not an ornithologist he did however leave a wonderful direct and indirect legacy to birders and conservationists. He wrote papers documenting the avifauna, of several islands, including Paloe off west Flores (Verheijen 1961, containing the only known ornithological records from this island), and Roti off Timor (Verheijen 1976, interestingly not directly referred to by Johnston & Jepson 1996 in their recent review for this island), as well as Flores. He documented breeding seams in birds of Flores with more than 2000 records of 103 species (Verheijen 1964), which remains by far the most comprehensive review of avian reproduction in Wallacea. Indeed, together with Voous (1950) and Hellebrekers & Hoogerwerf (1967) it is the best work on this subject in Indonesia. His work is widely referred to in White & Bruce (1986), Coates & Bishop (1997) and Verhoeve & Holmes (1998). He was honoured in the description and naming of the Flores Monarch *Monarcha sacerdotum* (endemic to far west Flores) the species name "given in honour of the two priests [J. Verheijen and Erwin Schmutz] who, in recent years, have contributed so much to the knowledge of the avifauna of Flores" (Mees 1973).

Less directly his "Bird names in Manggarai, Flores, Indonesia" provides a wealth of information on the birds of Flores, including records for 13 species new to Flores and more than 50 local names (together with their origin including some interesting 'folk tales') for birds of west Flores. A favourite is the Manggarai name for the Black naped Oriole *Oriolus chinensis* "Muku Tee", which means ripe banana. The Changeable Hawk eagle is recognised as two species, with a local name given for both the wet season and the dry season however throughout its range colour phases associated with the seasons is unknown. Interestingly, this Nusa Tenggara subspecies of the Changeable Hawk eagle *Spizaetus cirrhatous flores* is currently being described as a full species, the Flores Hawk eagle *Spizaetus flores* (Gjershaug *et al* in prep).

He was perhaps even better known as an avid botanist. After he was released from pastoral duties J. Verheijen concentrated on botanical fieldwork, leading to collections of about 5580 specimens. Plants discovered by Father Verheijen and named after him are *Acacia verheijenii* Nielsen, *Elaeocarpus verheijenii* Weibel, and *Saurauia verheijenii* Hoogl (M.A. Willemsen, National Herbarium of the Netherlands). Amazingly, through his efforts and that of E. Schmutz S.V.D., the flora

of West Flores and neighbouring islands including Komodo, Roti, Paloe and Sumba is perhaps the best known of Indonesia at present.

Since 1995 an anthropologist, Ms. M.A. Willemsen, has been preparing her Ph.D. thesis on the life of Father Verheijen. According to her and J. Veldkamp, Father Verheijen was "a most amiable and unpretentious man of accurate knowledge". He dedicated his whole life to the task of documenting the names and uses of plants and birds, and the languages of Nusa Tenggara. He returned to The Netherlands in 1993 at the age of 85. There he finished his last publications.

Father Verheijen will be missed by the many birdwatchers who visited West Flores in the 1970s through to the 1990s (and botanists from the National Herbarium of the Netherlands, as well as anthropologists, linguists and other friends). Botanically orientated biographies are given in the *Flora Malesiana* (1974: p. 100) and the *Flora Malesiana Bulletin* (1976: pp. 2605-2609; and 1978: pp. 3011-3012). An obituary written by M.A. Willemsen and J.F. Veldkamp was also published in the *Flora Malesiana Bulletin* in 1997.

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