

## SOME FIELD OBSERVATIONS OF THE ENDEMIC SULAWESI RAILS

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The remarkable endemic avifauna of Sulawesi includes two little known rails, Snoring Rail *Aramidopsis plateni*, and Bald-faced Rail *Gymnocrex rosenbergii*. Snoring Rail is known from 11 specimens from North, Central and South-east Sulawesi (White & Bruce 1986), all but one having been collected before 1940. The latest specimen was obtained from villagers in Lore Lindu National Park, Central Sulawesi, in 1980 (Watling 1983, P.B. Taylor pers. comm.). There have been no documented sightings of Snoring Rail since the 1930's (Ripley 1977). Bald-faced Rail is known from just one Sulawesi specimen, and three from Peleng (White & Bruce 1986), although other specimens have apparently been collected in the past (1940) but were eaten or lost (Coomans de Ruiter 1947). Very little is known about the habits of either species.

During a three week visit to Lore Lindu National Park, Central Sulawesi, in 1987, I observed one, and probably two, Snoring Rails in Ahe Sopa River valley at c.750m on 7 July. The following day, I again heard, but did not see, Snoring Rail, but saw a Bald-faced Rail in the vicinity.

### **Snoring Rail**

My attention was drawn to this species by its call, which I first mistakenly thought was a wild pig. The call was a distinctive, but rather quiet "snore", lasting c.1-2 seconds. This was presumably the same call heard and described by Heinrich (in Stresemann 1941).

The call consisted of a very brief "wheez" followed immediately by a longer drawn out snoring noise, which I described as "ee-orrrr". This call was frequently heard during the first hour of observations, from 11.00 hours, and enabled me to locate and see the bird(s), which were at first unexpectedly easy to see. Subsequently the bird(s) became more elusive, and stopped calling during the afternoon.

A second call, more difficult to localise, was heard more frequently both during the initial hour and again just before dusk. This call, also brief and very quiet, was a deep sigh, "hmmmm". I again heard this call on 8 July, but failed to see the bird. I associated both calls described here with Snoring Rail since whenever I succeeded in locating these calls I saw only this species.

The bird(s), which appeared tail-less, had a long reddish bill, which appeared to be slightly downcurved. The body was slaty, with whitish

throat and rufous back of neck and chestnut wings. Although flank barring was not noticed, the sides of the lower body were not seen well. The rufous colour of the hind neck, and chestnut of the inner remiges, were much brighter than depicted in Ripley (1977).

### **Bald-faced rail**

From a hidden vantage point behind a fallen tree trunk, I had a brief but excellent view of a Bald-faced Rail on 8 July. The bird was very wary, and having spotted me, ran off with its tail cocked over its back, making a quiet clucking call. Subsequently I neither saw it again nor heard other calls. Its species was very distinctive: a large short-billed rail with a large pale bluish-white eye patch. The upperparts were chestnut, underparts slaty, and the tail black.

### **Habitat**

White (in White & Bruce 1986) gives the habitat of Snoring Rail as "dense liana and bamboo second growth bush on the borders of lowland or highland forest", whilst Watling's 1980 specimen was supposedly from "secondary scrub near rice fields" (from the specimen label; P.B. Taylor pers. comm). Heinrich reported Bald-faced Rail to be a bird of primary forest (in Stresemann 1941), whilst Coomans de Ruiter (1947) found this rail in the same areas as Snoring Rail.

I found both species in areas of forest (probably old secondary forest) where the forest structure was little different from primary forest. The area had very recently been opened up by rattan cutters. However, the area frequented by Snoring Rail had not been disturbed, although the path used by rattan cutters passed close by.

The Snoring Rail(s) stayed within the confines of a narrow strip (c.30m wide and 80m long) of thick understorey dominated by rattans bordering a fast flowing stream. The ground was exceedingly wet and peaty throughout. Water trickled over the surface in places, and formed a narrow shallow muddy gully in one area, where the bird(s) spent much of their time foraging during my period of observation.

Bordering this area, the ground was drier, with a thick understorey of small saplings, a few clumps of bamboo, and less dense rattan, some of which had been newly cut and removed. It was in this area that I saw Bald-faced Rail, although upon seeing me it fled into the wetter, more impenetrable area frequented by Snoring Rail.

My observations lead me to suspect that both species are inhabitants of thick understorey in swampy forest. Perhaps both species are able to survive in thick secondary growth at the forest edge, but I would question Watling's (1983) claim that Snoring Rail occasionally enters rice fields. Although many of the villagers in Lore Lindu are no doubt

very observant, it is quite feasible that they could mistake Buff-banded Rail, *Gallirailus philippensis*, a species commonly seen in rice fields, for Snoring Rail. Stresemann (1941) also suspected that local villagers confused the identification of different rails; although villagers claimed that Bald-faced Rail had a snoring call, Stresemann attributed this to confusion with Snoring Rail.

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