

NICOBAR PIGEON NESTING COLONIES IN IRIAN JAYA

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The Nicobar Pigeon *Caloenas nicobarica* is distributed throughout most of the Indo-Australasian region from the Nicobar Islands and Mergui Archipelago eastwards to the Philippines, New Guinea and Solomon Islands (Goodwin 1983). Largely inhabitants of small islands, individuals are said to range widely, migrating among small islands, larger islands and mainland coastal forests. By all accounts it is a colonial nester (Goodwin 1983) and nests exclusively on small islands, but will travel to larger islands and mainland coastal forests, near sea level, to forage (Beehler et al. 1987).

In New Guinea, this species is found on many small islands, but there are no records from the southern coast (Beehler et al. 1987). In Irian Jaya (western New Guinea), its presence has been rarely recorded and its island breeding colonies are reported to be susceptible to extermination (J. Diamond, pers. comm.). Irian Jaya is Indonesia's largest province, and the Nicobar Pigeon has been protected by Indonesian law since 1931.

In April 1985, Lucy Gilkes observed several individuals on Pulau Kumbur in the *Kepulauan* Auri within the eastern portion of the proposed Teluk Cendrawasih marine conservation area (Gilkes and Adipati 1987). In June 1987, Gilkes and Evie Adipati found remains of nests on Pulau Kumbur. On 20 December 1987, Gilkes, Adipati and I visited Pulau Kumbur and nearby Pulau Nutabari, two small coral cays approximately 2 ha and 4 ha respectively (3°00', 3°07'S, 135°00'-, 135°10'E). These islands are used during the breeding season (October-March) by both Nicobars and Pied Imperial Pigeons *Ducula bicolor*. On Kumbur, there were more than 150 individuals, mostly Nicobars. On Nutabari, there were probably twice this number. Nests on both islands were located from about 2 m to 12 m height in the trees. Half of Pulau Kumbur was covered in tall trees, mostly *Casuarina* and some *Ficus*; scrub vegetation and creepers covered the remaining areas. While Kumbur is low-lying, Nutabari is composed of rugged uplifted coral, with more abundant, diverse and less disturbed vegetation, including abundant fig trees. Pulau Kumbur is the more disturbed of the two islands and many of its *Casuarina* trees have been felled in recent years and used for firewood and shelters by fishermen staying overnight on the island. This habitat disturbance, combined with hunting, could lead to the extermination of this breeding colony.

Called "burung mas" in Indonesia, the Nicobar Pigeon is sought by hunters due to its rarity and beauty, but also the presence of such

large numbers in a small area seems to evoke a "shooting gallery" response. On Pulau Kumbur, we found a small dump with at least 86 pigeon skulls, plus other bones. Based on associated feathers, remains were of both Nicobars and Pied Imperials, but mostly Nicobars as evidenced by the preponderance of their feathers. The remains were difficult to age, either several weeks or several months old, but surely were of individuals taken during the current breeding season. We also found evidence that 4.5 mm lead air gun pellets had been used on the island.

It may be that pigeons are now favouring the less disturbed Pulau Nutabari, where no evidence of hunting and little habitat disturbance were found, although the nesting colony here could be expected to be equally vulnerable. Although the nesting season coincides with the period of rough weather and seas (October - March), that fact does not appear to be a sufficient deterrent to hunters.

The management plan prepared for the proposed Teluk Cendrawasih marine conservation area prescribes protection of breeding colonies on these small, isolated islands. According to the plan, "These birds are protected by Indonesian law, and it is extremely important that they receive strict protection during their nesting season (October - March). To enforce this, it is essential that PHPA guards be stationed full-time on Kumbur Island (with frequent visits to Nutabari Island) during the nesting season. Particular care should be taken by the guards so as not to disturb the birds" (dikes and Adipati 1987, p. 84). The implementation of this recommendation will hopefully be made so as to protect what is apparently one of the very few Nicobar Pigeon rookeries remaining in Irian Jaya.

References :

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