

NOTES ON THE OBSERVATION OF A TALIABU MASKED OWL
Tyto nigrobrunnea ON TALIABU ISLAND, INDONESIA.

by

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On the evening of 3 October 1991, we were searching for nightbirds in the vicinity of Tubang logging camp, in the north east corner of Taliabu. We had attempted to locate the endemic Taliabu Masked Owl on previous evenings at various localities elsewhere on the island, but without success.

Our search method on the evening of 3 October followed a similar pattern to that of other evenings. This involved driving slowly along dirt logging tracks, sat in the back of an open jeep, spotlighting the forest along the road with a powerful flashlight attached to a tractor battery. Stops were made at regular intervals to listen for calling birds and to check on likely patches of forest. The forest in this part of the island had already been logged over, and was mostly regarded as secondary forest in nature.

We had driven around the forest tracks for one and a half to two hours without success, and were on our way back to our base (by now it was approximately 10.30 pm), when the jeep's headlights picked up a medium to large sized owl sitting bolt upright on the ground on the track in front of the jeep.

We stopped the jeep and trained all available light onto the bird. The owl remained on the track, approximately 15 metres in front of the jeep for approximately 45 seconds before it flew off into the forest, and was not seen again, despite searching. It was not heard to call.

Description:

A *Tyto* owl, judged to be slightly larger than a barn owl *Tyto alba*, the most obvious feature was the heart shaped facial disc typical of a *Tyto* owl. The bird appeared quite short tailed.

The bird was dark smoky grey on the upperparts, with a brownish tinge and no noticeable evidence of any speckling on the upperparts. The facial disc was dusky white, with a buffish tinge, the strongest coloration (brownish rufous) around the eyes.

As the bird was facing away from us, and looking over its shoulder, it was not possible to see the colour and pattern of the underparts. The leg colour was noted as dark grey. As the bird flew into the trees, the underwing colour appeared grey.

Status of Taliabu Masked owl:

Prior to the expedition, the only evidence for the presence of a *Tyto* species on Taliabu was the type specimen of Taliabu Masked Owl, an adult female, collected from Taliabu in 1938 by local hunters employed by the collector J.J. Menden. Menden did not provide details of the precise locality, habitat type, altitude or circumstances surrounding the bird's collection (Bishop 1989). The type specimen is retained in the Staatliche Museum für Tierkunde, Dresden, Germany.

Slide photographs of the type specimen have been obtained by the authors, courtesy of Dresden Museum. The photographs show that the owl is grey brown above with faint, irregular white flecking on the mantle and flight feathers. This faint flecking was not seen on the individual observed, however it is important to remember that it was only observed for a brief period under powerful artificial lighting conditions. The wings and the tail are the same colour with possibly some slight traces of barring on the tail. The underparts are golden brown with some black spotting and vermiculations. The facial disc is rufous, the darkest area of feathering being around the eyes.

A total of six *Tyto* owl species is recognised from Wallacea by White & Bruce (1986). Taliabu Masked Owl is considered by the authors to possibly be a representative of Minahassa Owl (*Tyto inexpectata*), a species known only from north east Sulawesi. Some authorities (Schodde & Mason 1980) consider Taliabu Masked Owl to be part of the Masked Owl (*Tyto novaehollandiae*) complex of Australia, Papua New Guinea and Indonesia. It is thought the *Tyto novaehollandiae* group could represent an old radiated group in Australia and that this could explain the relict populations as resulting from a subsequent range contraction (White & Bruce 1986).

Based on our study on the Sula Island group, Taliabu Masked Owl has been afforded the status 'Vulnerable' by Birdlife International (*CoSarela* 1994).

References:

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