

RECORDS OF HOUSE SPARROWS IN IRIAN JAVA

by
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(from details supplied by Phil Gregory*)

On 24 July 1995, Phil Gregory with Ian Burrows, and Roger and Gary Burrows, submitted some noteworthy sightings from Irian Jaya obtained during January 1994 (see for example their Short Communications in *Kukila* 8). Among these were the following observations of House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*:

Biak, 3 Jan 1994. One male and two females, carrying food, apparently nesting in the warehouses at the airport.

Sorong, 4 Jan 1994. Two females, feeding among the beach debris at the ferry site to Batanta.

These records were held on file pending further enquiries. It is significant that the observers did not record Tree Sparrow *P. montanus*, previously recorded at Biak (Holmes 1989), and the possibility existed of a misidentification of the earlier record. However, S. van Balen (pers. comm.), specifically examined the sparrows at Biak (at the airport on 11 January 1997 and at Marao the following day) and confirmed the presence of Tree Sparrow in considerable numbers. (These observations were made together with, respectively, Bruce Beehler and Charles Francis, and Bruce Beehler, Scott Miller and Alien Allison). Tree Sparrows had also been confirmed at Biak by Margaret Cameron in August 1995 (*in litt.* to Phil Gregory). [On 12-13 February 1997, S. van Balen together with William Rombang also encountered two Tree Sparrows, shy and flighty birds, at Amamapare, on the south coast of Irian Jaya near Timika].

Subsequent correspondence with Phil Gregory indicated that the observers were aware of the expected presence of Tree Sparrow, and therefore took careful notes of the observed House Sparrows. The Indonesian Ornithological Society (IOS) has no reason to question the validity of the records, despite the somewhat peculiar circumstances. Phil Gregory (*in litt.* to DAH 21 April 1997) comments that this pattern of occurrence reflects the phases of colonization of Port Moresby by the House Sparrow: 4 birds on 30 Dec 1976 reducing to 1 by 13 Jan 1977, and then none until a female sighted on

10 and 12 June 1986, before the sudden colonization in the 1990s. The colonization of Biak may be complicated by the fact that Tree Sparrows are already in residence, and it will be instructive to monitor further developments. Doubtless both species have arrived by ship, although only the Tree Sparrow appears to have become firmly established (although incidentally it has not yet been reported from Sorong).

For the present time, the IOS will not be accepting the House Sparrow on the Indonesian list, until such time as it has been proved to have become firmly established. [Similarly, a record of 3 Sooty headed Bulbuls *Pycnonotus aurigaster* on Biak on 28 Jan 1995 (DAH pers. obs.) surely represent escaped cagebirds, and have hopefully not yet established themselves as feral residents on the island]. While a study of sparrows may not be a high priority on anyone's schedule in Irian Jaya, we do ask that visitors pay close attention to them during their necessary sojourn in urban centres.

Reference

Holmes, D.A 1989. The Tree Sparrow reaches New Guinea. *Kukila* 4(3 4): 150.

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