First Records and Breeding of Red-legged Crake *Rallina fasciata* in Timor, Lesser Sundas

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Ringkasan. Meskipun tersebar luas dan dikenal sebagai penetap yang berbiak di Flores, Tikusan Ceruling belum pernah dilaporkan ada di kepulauan Timor sebelumnya. Laporan ini mendokumentasikan dua hasil pengamatan terhadap spesies ini pada bulan Februari 2009, yang pertama terlihat di kawasan hutan Bipolo, yaitu 1-2 burung dewasa dengan dua anak yang bulu-bulunya sedang tumbuh baik dan yang kedua dari satu burung terlihat pada hutam musim di Camplong, c. 25 dan 46 km timur Kupang, secara berurutan.

The Red-legged Crake *Rallina fasciata* has a wide distribution from India through Southeast Asia, and the Philippines, to the Greater Sundas, and many parts of Wallacea (Coates & Bishop 1997). Across the Greater Sundas it is considered to be resident, possibly augmented by northern winter visitors in some regions. Breeding has been recorded in Sumatra and Java from January to April (Sody 1930; Hoogerwerf 1949; Marle & Voous 1988). In the Lesser Sundas, it is known to be resident on Flores, with clutches being recorded in February and March (Schmutz 1978; Mees 2006; *contra* Coates & Bishop 1997). Elsewhere in Wallacea its status is unclear, but it is considered to be a dispersive non-breeding migrant to some islands, with records from April to December (White & Bruce 1986; Taylor & van Perlo 1998). Surprisingly, until now the species has not been recorded from Timor (Coates & Bishop 1997; Trainor 2005; Trainor *et al.* 2008), despite records from Kisar, off the eastern tip of Timor island, and even on Ambon, much further east (White & Bruce 1986). In this report I provide details of two separate observations of Red-legged Crakes in West Timor, Indonesia, including a breeding record.

My first observation was made in the small remnant patch (c. 100 ha; 30 m asl) of tall semi-evergreen lowland forest near Bipolo (Gibbs 1990; Noske 1996; Noske & Saleh 1996), some 25 km east of Kupang, the capital of West Timor. To the south of this forest patch lies an area of wet rice, and dry agricultural land lies on all other sides. Although the forest is supposedly protected as a nature reserve (Cagar Alam), there is no active management so domesticated cattle and feral pigs browse throughout the forest and there is much evidence of timber and firewood extraction.

The wet season (November-April) had started by the time of my visit, and whilst there were few areas of standing water within the forest, some of the cattle tracks were extremely muddy. At about 08:40 hrs on 5 February 2009 I was slowly and silently birding along a narrow and fairly dry cattle track through

quite dense understorey when I heard a loud, unfamiliar non-passerine vocalisation of which I managed to tape record 51s with my cassette-recorder (Fig. 1). I later transcribed the vocalisation as a rapid "ked-ek…ked-ek…ked-ed-ek...ked-ed-ek…ked…KED-EK…KED-EK …EK…EK…", the upper case script indicating an increase in volume and intensity of calls. A total of 57 such disyllabic (or trisyllabic) calls were given during the recording, i.e. a little more than one call per second. It sounded very close and probably on the ground, but from my standing position I had little chance of seeing it so I dropped to my haunches and, using my 10x42 Leica binoculars, carefully scanned through the understorey. After a few minutes I suddenly spotted movement some 7-8 m ahead of me in a dense patch of vegetation that was c. 20 cm high. Soon a bird's head briefly popped up; it was rich chestnut-brown with red eyes and a relatively short pointed slate-coloured bill. Being well inside lowland forest I immediately identified it as a Red-legged Crake, a species that I had seen on a number of occasions at Khao Nor Chuchi in southern Thailand. The bird appeared very agitated, and soon ducked down, but then re-appeared and ran a few metres further away from me in less dense ground vegetation.

Judging by the behaviour of this adult and the intermittent anxious calling of another bird from further away, I was not surprised to see two dull-brown, well-feathered crake chicks trot after the adult. They were about two-thirds the size of the adult and seemed to have paler throats. However the views were brief and partially obscured, and there may have been more chicks, given that females are known to lay three to six eggs (Taylor 1996; Taylor & van Perlo 1998). Of the various vocalisations ascribed to the species my taped calls most closely match the territorial call, described as a "loud series of nasal 'pek' noises" (Taylor 1996), except that the calls were disyllabic (Fig. 1). Moreover the territorial call is purportedly only given at dawn and dusk during the breeding season (Taylor & van Perlo 1998). Considering my closeness to the chicks, the vocalisation may represent an alarm call.

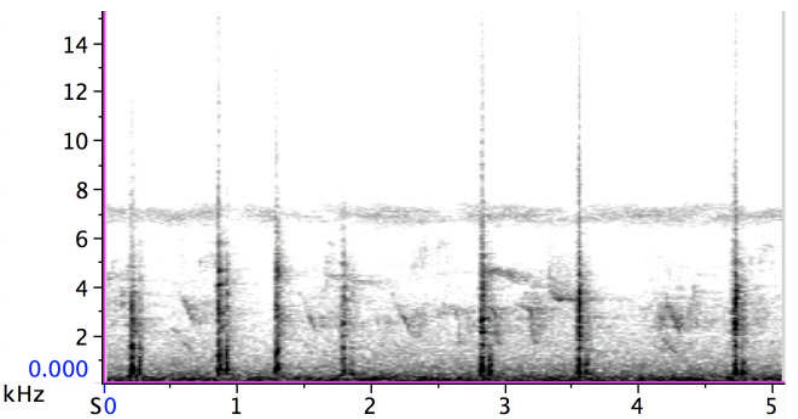

Figure 1. Sonogram of Red-legged Crake near Bipolo, West Timor (recording, N. Dymond).

At this stage my knees were giving up as I had been crouching almost motionless for a long time, so I stood up and decided to try a short burst of playback from my recording. One crake immediately replied very briefly from a location well away from where the other adult and chicks had last been seen. Then, I spotted it silently and stealthily picking its way through the ground vegetation towards me. Through my binoculars I could see its chestnut-brown head, neck and breast, red eyes and relatively short, pointed slate-grey bill, and the diagnostic bold black and white flank bars and narrow buffy bars extending across the wing-coverts. It came very close, perhaps no more than 3 m from me and then, to my amazement it emerged out in the open on the cattle track and ran away boldly, clearly revealing its bright red legs and feet. A few moments later I spotted it repeating its stealthy approach, and then once more it emerged and sprinted away down the track. I presumed this was a distraction display. I waited a while, but neither saw nor heard any of the crakes again.

Four days later, on 9 February 2009, I was birding in the semi-deciduous forest at Camplong (230 m asl), c. 46 km east of Kupang (Gibbs 1990; Noske 1996; Noske & Saleh 1996). At mid-morning I was sitting quietly on the main track through the forest, when an adult Red-legged Crake emerged from dense vegetation some 20-25m away and strolled cautiously across the track, only to disappear into the dense vegetation on the other side. On this occasion no vocalizations were given.

Conclusions

The absence of previous records of the Red-legged Crake from Timor may be partly due to the fact that most birders and bird tours visit Timor during the dry season (May to October), and most surveys avoid the wettest months (January and February). Moreover, owing to their skulking, ground-dwelling habits, rails are generally under-recorded. The status of rails is particularly poorly known in Wallacea. For example, three rails have recently been added to the Timor avifauna (Trainor 2005), but there have been no detailed studies, and little is known of their residence or breeding status.

Although the breeding biology of this species is insufficiently known (Taylor 1996; Taylor & van Perlo 1998), the closely related Red-necked Crake *R. tricolor* is reported as having an incubation period of 18-22 days, and its chicks still being downy, except for the wing feathers, at 4 weeks (Marchant & Higgins 1993). As the chicks at Bipolo were well feathered, one can assume that they came from a clutch laid at least 7 weeks before they were sighted, i.e. mid December 2008, or earlier. This is earlier in the season than expected from the dates of Flores or Javan clutches cited above, but is consistent with the wet season breeding of many Timorian birds (Noske 2003). Given the above breeding record the species may be described more accurately as a breeding visitor to Timor during the wet-season (November-May).

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[Editor's note. Since this paper was submitted, a further record for Timor emerged, involving a single bird seen at Bipolo in March 2010 (Nick Brickle, pers. comm.), just 13 months after the author's observations at the same location.]

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