

**SOME BIOLOGICAL NOTES ON THE
TAWNY-BREASTED PARROT FINCH *ERYTHRURA HYPERYTHRA***

by S. van Balen

(Final version received November 18 1986)

The Tawny-breasted Parrofinch *Erythrura hyperythra* was described for the first time by Reichenbach in 1862 from a specimen erroneously thought to have been collected in New Guinea. Vordeman (1883) described a second specimen collected in west Java. The parrotfinch has since been reported from Bast Java, Lombok, Sumbawa, Flores, Sulawesi, West and East Malaysia, Luzon and Mindoro. However, because of its rarity and secretive behaviour, very little is known of the bird in nature (but see Burkard, 1982).

on February 12 1986 the author encountered an apparently nest-building bird in more or less disturbed primary montane forest near Ciloto (puncak. West Java. 107° 03'E, 6° 45'S) at 1570 metres elevation. The nest was situated approximately three metres below the top of a 15 metre high tree that was without leaves and almost branchless. The tree stood on the steep, east slope of a ridge in a relatively open area with fallen trees, at the upper edge of a landslide caused by a storm in the previous month. Owing to the dangerous condition of the tree and its precarious situation, it was not possible to gain access to the nest. Therefore it was decided to concentrate on observations of breeding behaviour.

This is believed to be the first documented breeding record for Java, and possibly its entire range, H. Bartels (1906) reported breeding at 1000 metres on Mount Pangrango. West Java, but without further documentation. H. Bartels (1986, pers. comm) reported that in March 1928 he found a nest at Danu pangkalan on the west slope of Mount Guntur (Bandung, West Java), where the species was seen regularly. The nest was still being built by the bird(s) and situated at 4 metres height in the crown ca 0.5 metre below the top, near the main trunk of a small tree at the forest edge. The outer part of the nest consisted of fine twigs or roots, no moss was seen. The inner part consisted of finer fibres and probably leaflets of grass, like those used by *Lonchura leucogastroides*. The nest was in its early "see-through" phase, observations were stopped because of the risk of attracting the attention of people passing by on the nearby road. It is not known whether the nest has been finished or disturbed. No eggs were collected. Hellebrekers & Hoogerwerf (1967) state that no information on the eggs of this species is available in literature. Verheijen (1964) reported two breeding cases in May and June for the species on Flores without oological data.

The author revisited the site on 13 and 18 February with a camera, for periods of 4 and 7 1/2 hours respectively in the morning. One bird, believed to be the male from its blackish forehead and blue forecrown, was seen bringing material to the nesthole, consisting of both partly green and completely dry broadleaved grasses and ferns, and once some fine, root-like material, with its entrance facing south, the hole was hidden in a clump of ferns, orchids and mosses that overgrew a short stub, and was situated behind a vertical, narrow branch that served as a landing place for the arriving bird(s) (see Figure 1). They rarely perched on leaving, prior to each building session, the bird would watch the environs for several minutes sitting on this branch, before it disappeared into the scrub below, in search for nest materials. Building activities were continued for at most half an hour during which the nest was visited about four to six times and after which the bird(s) disappeared for more than two hours. Although two birds are depicted in Figure 1, in fact two birds were never seen together and it could be that one bird remained inside to arrange materials, regarding the very short time usually spent by the carrying bird

in the nest-hole each time. Other bird species that showed interest in the nest-hole were a Great Tit *Parus major* and a Blue Nuthatch *Sitta azurea*, each of which paid a short visit to the tree on the morning of February 18, looked into the nest-hole but did not enter it.

Fourteen days after the first encounter the observations were continued for four hours during the morning. The presumed male was seen to visit at least six times, at irregular intervals over a 1 1/2 hour period, but spending only a few minutes inside. No nest material was brought. More time was spent by watching the environs from the vertical branch.

Last "nest activity" was observed on March 11 when the author visited the site together with B. van Helvoort. One bird was flushed from the nest when the visitors had approached to within a few metres. During sessions on March 5, 19 and 26 and April 2 and 15 of 1 to 1 1/2 hours each, the birds were not observed at the site. A single bird was seen on March 26, several hundred metres away, foraging in some tall pine trees, and on April 2, one was seen in low scrub near the same trees.

More information on vocalizations was hoped for, especially on its song as described so precisely by Robiller (1981). Except for some call notes, sounding like a soft yet rather penetrating "sree", uttered in flight and sometimes while watching the environs of the nest, no sounds were heard.

It is interesting to note that observations at nearby Cibodas during March have been of single birds (Hoogemerf, 1949, and Andrew, 1985), dated March 17 and March 5 respectively. Outside this period, observations have been of small parties (Vorderman, 1883, Van Balen, 1984, Andrew, 1985). Vorderman reported a male collected on September 28 with well-developed testicles. D.A. Holmes (pers. comm.) however noted a solitary bird in a mixed feeding flock at Tretes (East Java) in September 1979, though there may have been others present.

The relatively open habitat in which these otherwise very cautious birds chose their nest site is surprising, possibly this was due to loyalty to a site either used every year, or chosen prior to the storm damage of the preceding January.

In literature the main habitat of this species is reported to be bamboo forest, and their food consists mainly of bamboo seeds. H. Bartels (pers. comm.) reported observations by his father at Cimungkat (south slope of Mount Pangrango, West Java), where the birds were seen sporadically and a flock was seen foraging on fruiting bamboo *Pinochloa scandena*. On Puncak, however, the birds have been observed only in secondary and primary mixed forest and at the forest edge; they were seen feeding in pine trees, which Whitehead had already reported in Mindoro (in McGregor, 1909). Vorderman (1883) also reported parts of flowers or fruits of a fig species.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank Mr H. Bartels (Naarden, The Netherlands) and Or G.F. Mees (Museum of Natural History, Leiden, The Netherlands) for their kind help in giving additional information, and Mr D.A. Holmes and Prof. Dr.S. Somadikarta for their comments on the draft.

R i n g k a s a n

Erythrura hyperythra, adalah jenis burung yang jarang sekali ditemukan di alam bebas, karena itu tingkah lakunya hampir tidak diketahui. Pada tanggal 12 February 1986, burung jenis ini ditemukan sedang membuat sarang di hutan primer di Ciloto (puncak, Jawa Barat) pada ketinggian 1570 m dpl. Sarangnya terletak 1k. 3 m di bawah puncak pohon yang tingginya 1k. 15 m. Pohonnya sudah tidak berdaun dan hampir tidak bercabang. Di pagi hari tanggal 13 dan 18 Februari 1986, burung ini dipotret dan tingkah lakunya diamati selama masing-masing 4 dan 7 setengah jam.

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Figure 1. Nest-building Tawny-breasted Parrotfinch *Erythrura*

hyperythra, drawn from two photographs, Puncak, West Java, 18 February 1986.

