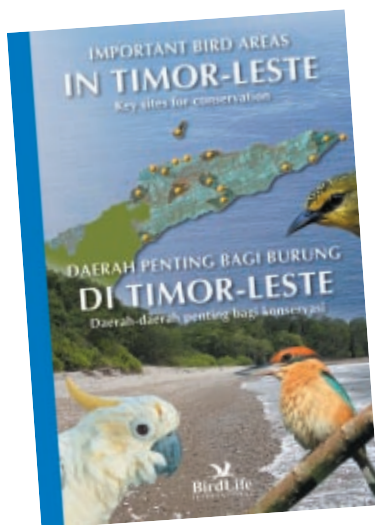


A young nation protects its natural riches

More than 20 per cent of Timor-Leste remains forested, providing habitats for a whole suite of endemic birds. BirdLife's new IBA directory for Timor-Leste identifies 16 key sites, and three have already been included in the island's first National Park.



Timor-Leste, the first new sovereign state of the 21st Century, achieved independence in May 2002 after 450 years of colonialism and a subsequent 24 year struggle against occupation. Although economically among the poorest countries, Timor-Leste has proved to have important forest and wetland habitats, with natural resources and biodiversity to match the resilience of its human and cultural assets.

These intact habitats are of immense importance for threatened and restricted range species of the Timor and Wetar

Endemic Bird Area. One species, Slaty Cuckoo-dove *Turacoena modesta* (also known as Timor Black Pigeon) has been downlisted from Vulnerable to Near Threatened because of populations newly discovered in the coastal forests.

Despite the pressures for rapid economic development, the government and people of Timor-Leste are committed to maintaining their natural and cultural riches. Protection of the environment, preservation of natural resources and safeguarding of sustainable livelihoods are guaranteed under the Constitution, and backed by

strong regulations—such as a total ban on commercial logging since the year 2000.

At the end of 2007, BirdLife International published *Important Bird Areas of Timor-Leste*, which identifies 16 of the most extensive and least disturbed forests and wetlands on Timor Island. The IBA research represents joint work by BirdLife and Timor-Leste's Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (MAF), and the Minister of Agriculture has welcomed it as providing important baseline information for the creation of a protected areas network.



LEFT Large areas of contiguous forest remain intact on Timor-Leste from sea level right through to higher altitudes (Colin Trainor)

ABOVE Fawn-breasted Whistler *Pachycephala orpheus* is common in dry forest and scrub on Timor island (James Eaton/Birdtour Asia)

BELOW Government staff training in bird survey techniques (Colin Trainor)



In 2007, Timor-Leste declared the Nino Konis Santana National Park, covering 123,600 hectares, and linking together three IBAs: Lore, Mount Paitchau and Lake Iralalaro, and Jaco Island.

“Timor-Leste has suffered deforestation, and the remaining forests are still fragmented and under threat, yet it may still prove to be more than 20 per cent forested, significantly higher than adjacent islands to the west”, said Richard Grimmett, former head of BirdLife International’s Asia Division.

“What’s most striking is that at Nino Konis Santana National Park, visitors can find an unbroken succession of habitat from coastal to montane forest, which is rare now anywhere in the world”, adds Roger Safford of BirdLife’s Site Action Unit.

When, shortly after independence, news of the potentially intact habitats reached Richard Grimmett, he contacted Colin Trainor of Charles Darwin University, Australia, who had previously worked for BirdLife’s Indonesia Programme in Nusa Tenggara, including West Timor. Richard

asked Colin to carry out preliminary survey work, and make contact with key members of Timor-Leste’s forestry and environment departments.

On arrival, Colin was immediately struck by the contrast with the west of the island. “On that first visit, I took public transport, then walked from the village of Tutuala in the far east down to near Jaco island. Within about an hour I’d seen Timor Green-pigeons (*Treron psittaceus*, Endangered) in relatively intact dry forest. There were also Slaty Cuckoo-doves. Then I got down to Lore, where I found

fantastic coastal forest. I saw many of the key species in that short visit without trying very hard—for example, Yellow-crested Cockatoo *Cacatua sulphurea*.”

In 2003 Colin returned for the first full-scale survey, including several weeks in the area now covered by the National Park. “Among the most interesting things were flocks of up to 17 Yellow-crested Cockatoos at Lore.” He estimates that there are at least several hundred of these Critically Endangered cockatoos in Timor-Leste, including perhaps 100 individuals in the National Park.

In 2005, accompanied by Frank Lambert, he returned for another survey, and found a “pocket” of the Endangered Wetar Ground-dove *Gallicolumba hoedtii* on the south coast, close to the border with West Timor. “This was the only verified record from Timor Island for 74 years.” Other potentially suitable forests along the south coast remain to be surveyed.

Throughout his work Colin has been supported by Cathy Molnar, now Protected Areas Advisor to the Timor-Leste government. As a United Nations Volunteer, Cathy worked with the UN transitional administration, UNTAET, first with the Forestry, then the Environment Departments.

When UNTAET came to an end with independence in May 2002, Cathy returned reluctantly to her old job in Australia. Then Richard Grimmett emailed her to ask if she would take up the post of Protected Areas Advisor, created and funded by BirdLife and the New South Wales Department of Environment and Climate Change. Support for Cathy’s post was, and continues to be, received from Australian Volunteers International.

Under UNTAET, with the island newly open to exploitation by external investors, emergency environmental protection legislation had to be built quickly and from scratch. In 2000, a



LEFT Twenty-four restricted-range species have been recorded in Lake Iralalero Important Bird Area (Colin Trainor)

ABOVE Cinnamon-banded Kingfisher *Todiramphus australasia* is an uncommon and inconspicuous forest bird (Paul Pearson)

consortium attempted to build a casino complex in the heart of what is now the National Park. A protected area law was quickly developed, covering eight sites that had been identified under Indonesian authority, plus another seven, and was passed as Regulation 2000/19.

“It was a law created in emergency times, and is quite general but actually quite strong, and it’s served its purpose well; in fact, it’s formed the basis of the entire protected area network”, Cathy explains. “Since then we’ve been able to use it to stop several inappropriate developments. But it’s now becoming too restrictive as we move into active community-based protected area management, and we’ve secured funding from AusAID to develop full national protected areas policy and legislation.”

Although the Nino Konis Santana National Park has been formally declared, and a park manager has been appointed, much remains to be done. “We have funding from the UK government’s Darwin initiative to make it a fact on the ground. It’s to be jointly managed by

community and government, and very much community-based”, Cathy explains.

From the outset local communities have been supportive of the National Park and enthusiastic to see progress. “They’re even getting into the jargon—for example they talk about Category V”, (the IUCN management designation for protected areas managed for nature and people together) “and understand what it means for them. They have said that they want local involvement and benefits; there is awareness of pitfalls such as profits going to external entrepreneurs, and they ask for assistance to develop capacity to participate more equally in tourism and related industries.”

Manuel Mendes, Director of the Department of Protected Areas and National Parks, says that despite the need for overseas investment, Timor-Leste is determined to resist proposals such as oil palm cultivation in the protected areas.

“Most of the areas are good for forestry, but not for agriculture”, Manuel Mendes adds. “We need to work with

communities, who have traditionally sustained themselves with slash-and-burn agriculture, to develop more appropriate livelihoods.”

Cathy Molnar says that continuing lack of human resources and capacity is a problem. She is optimistic that it can be overcome—in fact, capacity-building is a key part of her job. Simply providing funds is not enough: it takes many years to build social capacity and establish institutions from zero. But she finds great willingness among the Timorese to get involved.

Roger Safford says that BirdLife is starting to link up with Timor-Leste NGOs. “To encourage the growth of local organisations, we’re keeping the ex-pat presence to a minimum, and ensuring that everybody who does go speaks a local language. And we’ve published the first field guide to Timor-Leste’s birds in English, Portuguese and Indonesian.”

Colin Trainor has high hopes that his surveys will uncover further habitats and bird populations, and perhaps rediscover lost species.

For example, the survey teams haven’t yet spent much time in the mountains. “There’s an endemic race of *Bradypterus* warbler. About five years ago, the race was split off and is now a full species, Timor Bush-warbler *Bradypterus timoriensis*. There are no records since 1931, when it was captured at the top of a mountain in West Timor, at about 1,800 metres. So there’s at least one bird left to be found in Timor-Leste, and it looks as if there’s reasonable habitat left for it.”

WB

by Nick Langley

The work in Timor Leste has been generously supported by Keidanren Nature Conservation Fund (Japan), Darwin Initiative (DEFRA, UK), Vogelbescherming Nederland (Birdlife in the Netherlands), Charles Darwin University (Australia), Darwin Initiative Regional Natural Heritage Programme (Australia), Dept of Environment and Climate Change, New South Wales (Australia) and Australian Volunteers International.