

Observations of the Royal Parrot Finch, *Erythrura regia*, on Vanuatu

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Whilst on an extended stay in Fiji to photograph the land birds for a proposed book, I had the chance to go to Vanuatu for a period of three weeks. I had long wanted to visit these islands to see the birdlife and especially to try and locate and observe the Royal Parrot Finch *Erythrura regia*. This is a small finch with a stunning bright blue body, green wings and bright scarlet head, nape and tail.

I had some information about finding a location of this bird from Andy Birchenough of Newcastle University in England who had carried out a rapid appraisal in 1999 by interviewing local villagers of their sightings followed by the observations of the university team³.

I had met a worker from the forestry department of Vanuatu whilst in Fiji and he kindly showed me around the island of Efate but we were unable to locate the bird here. I then headed for Espiritu Santo as there were a couple of conservation areas here, at Vatthe and Loru, I wanted to check out. Due to weather conditions I only managed to get to Loru Conservation Area on the east coast a 200 hectare area of forest commendably declared a protected area by the village landowner and his son who is an excellent bird guide.

In the hotel where I was staying, I met Stephen Totterman, who has spent a year of voluntary work surveying the birdlife of Vanuatu and has produced an excellent website⁵ giving much detail of Vanuatu birdlife. Steve, along with Roy Hills, works for Wantok, a local NGO working with villagers to conserve and make better use of natural resources. Steve told me of an excellent location to observe Royal Parrot Finches but I will not disclose this location due to the threat from unscrupulous bird collectors for the avicultural market.

I made arrangements for transport to the site and for a village stay. On the first morning I met a villager who said he would take me to the location in mid- afternoon and after some negotiation with the landowner, (and paying a fee), we made our way down a steep coastal path to the location of a natural spring that drips from a forested cliff face and where many birds, including the Royals, come to drink and bathe. The cliff face is half covered with vegetation such as ferns, moss and root systems down which the water drips. A large tree also allows easy access and escape for the birds. Within minutes of settling down quietly behind vegetation for cover, two Royal Parrot Finches emerged from the canopy above. Moving cautiously, they made their way to the lower part and began to bathe. A few feet further up the cliff, Vanuatu Silvereyes, *Zosterops flavifrons*, were bathing in what appeared to be their own area and continued to bathe in this small area during the whole of my observations over two days.

Over a two hour period, Royals appeared 6 times, staying for a short period, then back into the canopy and I managed to get some reasonable photographs.

As the sun began to sink in the sky we made our way back up the steep cliff and I arranged to return the next morning alone for a full day of observation.

On the following morning I arrived at the site at 5.50 am and set up a temporary hide using a piece of camouflage scrim net and surrounding vegetation. The first Parrot

finch arrived at 6.55am, a female that went to the lower end of the cliff face just above the pathway and, clinging to the dangling roots and vegetation, began to bathe. This bird stayed for about 5 minutes before flying into the canopy to preen. It was a full hour before the next bird arrived, another female that bathed in the same small area.

The species is not sexually dimorphic and it can be difficult to determine their sex. Having studied various species of Parrot finches (but not including Royals) in captivity some years ago, and studied various reports, I have gained much experience in judging the sex of the birds by observation of subtle differences. With this species in general, the males are brighter, bolder around the head and have more extensive red down the nape. This is a guide for adult birds but it can be difficult to sex some birds especially sub-adult birds, non-breeding and moulting birds. Of the latter, several observers have noted feather wear prior to moult that subdues the colours and can lead to confusion.

A couple of birds arrived over the next two hours, a male then a female, then at 11.05 am two adults, probably a breeding pair, and three immature birds arrived. The adults stayed in the canopy and the immature birds, two of them in sub-adult plumage with red feathers coming on to the face and one fledgling. The fledgling still had the tell-tale yellow bill and the fledgling plumage of green body and dull dark blue head. This bird also had remnants of iridescent beads, known as papillae, at each side of its gape. These papillae are present in all Parrot finches' young and are thought to aid the adults locate the gape whilst feeding young inside the domed nest. Once the birds have fledged the papillae recede over the next two to three weeks.

As the two other immature birds were much more advanced in the moult, I suspect they were from different nests but that further confuses things as, if this was the case, why was there only one pair of adults? Perhaps there could have been more unseen adults in the canopy.

All three cautiously made their way down and began to bathe for around 15 minutes. The adults seemed to remain in the canopy but could have bathed higher up as I did not have full view of all the cliff face.

Three immature birds arrived at 11.45 and were, I believe, the same three birds.

The following sightings were also made: 12.30 pm 1 adult pair; 1.20 pm, 1 adult male and 1 immature; 2.00 pm 1 adult pair; and at 2.30 1 adult female and two immature birds arrived and stayed for a full hour bathing, drinking, preening then bathing again. It is a well known fact that all Parrot finches love to bathe and the two immature birds proved it when they bathed for a full five minutes each and I managed to capture this on digital film along with around 150 digital still photographs.

Throughout the day, especially around mid-day and early afternoon, other species of birds came to the site including, Scarlet Robin, *Petroica multicolor*; Silver Eared Honeyeater, *Lichmera incana*; Broad Billed Flycatcher, *Myagra caledonica* and Emerald Winged Ground Dove, *Chalcophaps indica*; and White Rumped Swiftlets, *Aerodramus spodiopygius* were constantly flying in front of the cliff face.

In general the birds were silent but for the odd two note *di-dink* call typical of many Parrot Finch species. I observed some of the Parrot finches, both adult and immature, hunting underneath leaves in the tree above and picking off what appeared to be small insects. I also observed one immature get hold of a small white perpendicular flower head on a tree, similar to the stamen of Hibiscus, and run it through its bill as though to lick off the nectar. It left one flower intact but another was bitten off and nibbled for a few seconds. I had heard of a similar observation by a forestry worker in

Vanuatu who said he saw them 'eating flowers'. I have no way of confirming his observation but that is the first time I have seen this behaviour from any Parrot finch. The villagers also showed me three other type of fig tree of unknown species that the Parrot finches feed on other than in the Banyan fig trees. The fruits of these were the size of peas unlike the large figs seen in the photo by Heinrich Bregulla¹. Peter Rindom² noted the villagers showed him five different species of fig tree that are used for feeding by this species.

Just down the hill towards the sea I noted a spherical nest, quite possibly that of a Royal Parrot finch, built on the extremities of an overhanging branch about 6 metres above the sloping ground.

The site of the spring is a unique and wonderful place to enable observation of this rare and beautiful species and a rare opportunity for almost guaranteed views of the birds. I am currently making enquires with the Department of the Environment in Vanuatu to get this area declared a conservation area and secure legal protection. These birds would be highly sought after in Europe and America for the avicultural market and I fear that a 'good price' would be offered to the villagers to allow unscrupulous trapping. Some local villagers are keen to develop the site for tourism and although I do not object to this, I do hope the area can be protected prior to this development. I spoke to a local villager who is interested in developing and co-ordinating tourism generally throughout the area and to whom I expressed my concerns. He was very appreciative of this and, being an ex-policeman, said he would work to help protect them for the future as natural heritage and was keen to integrate them into the tourism

The surrounding area of the site is a steep cliff with just a narrow pathway that is unstable soon crumbles and would quickly deteriorate if used regularly. If development does take place the pathway, especially next to the spring would require reinforcing and a proper hide needs to be built.

Much more work needs to be done to fully assess and protect the status of the Royal Parrot Finch, whilst locally fairly abundant, it does appear to be seriously declining. The studies of Bregulla cited eleven islands where it could be found but Birchenough *et al* found it present on only four islands.

Several factors could be attributed to this including:

- a) The continued depletion of true forest due to logging and clearance for cultivation etc.
- b) Its specialist diet of figs and a suggestion by Rindom is that there is competition between the Parrot Finches and Fruit Doves for feeding areas and that the Fruit Doves remain dominant.
- c) Fragmentation of the already small population
- d) Almost all of the villagers carry and use hand catapults for shooting birds as a sport and, although I did not witness it personally, I suspect that *does include* the Parrot Finches even though the villagers assure me they do not.

Using one of my photographs of the Parrot Finch, I produced a poster for conservation education entitled 'The Pride of Vanuatu' and left it with Trinison Tari at the DOE to pass on to the villagers. This was a short term effort being the best I could in the very

short time available. A programme of education is obviously a must if we are to protect them.

The species is listed as vulnerable but, due to lack of data, it is possible it could be classed as endangered. Population surveys and further field studies of breeding and feeding biology are desperately needed if we are to halt the decline of these stunning birds long term.

Bibliography:

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