

## **Response to Comments by B. G. Totterman on Carter et al. (1997)**

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Totterman may be interpreting the term 'New Guinean' in more of a zoogeographical sense than we intended, wherein he apparently draws a line excluding the Trans-Fly region. However, the Trans-Fly is part of the island of New Guinea and is, therefore, 'New Guinean'. We agree that, in the main, the birds of Boigu are typical of the Trans-Fly, a region that has more of an Australasian avifauna than elsewhere in New Guinea, but is, nevertheless, geographically part of that island. An exception is the

Singing Starling *Aplonis cantoroides* which appears to be rare in that region. Whilst we were on Boigu, the association with the adjacent mainland was obvious to us. Species like Rainbow Lorikeet *Trichoglossus haematodus* and Eclectus Parrot *Eclectus roratus* were often seen flying in from there. Moreover, we were informed by the locals that, when their fig trees are in fruit, birds from the mainland flock to feed in them. Consequently, we stand by our statement.

Regarding subspecies, Totterman seems to have missed that we said that the Frilled Monarch *Arses telescopthalmus* which we saw resembled birds from New Guinea rather than Australia. It was just that we couldn't determine precisely which subspecies. Furthermore, it is known that where there are subspecific differences between shared species, the one occurring on Boigu is the New Guinea subspecies. Examples are Dusky *Myzomela obscura* and Red-headed Honeyeaters *M. erythrocephala* (Storr 1984).

With regard to the question of whether the numbers show a bias towards species from New Guinea or Australia, we consider it improper for Totterman to say we were wrong and then attempt to test the veracity of our statement with data added subsequently. He ought to have analysed the 86 species listed at that time. Nevertheless, we will investigate his analysis of the 94 species total. The more recent discovery of the Pale White-eye *Zosterops citrinellus* does shift the bias slightly but not sufficiently to negate our statement that the avifauna on Boigu is more New Guinean than Australian. We were tempted to argue that the Pale White-eye should be considered a neutral species since it is virtually confined to islands in Torres Strait but concede that, as the Trans-Fly is part of New Guinea, Torres Strait is part of Australia.

Totterman states that all but two species are shared with the Australian mainland. We consider there are at least three. This is because there is not yet an accepted mainland record of Gurney's Eagle *Aquila gurneyi*.

We were disappointed with, and consider unreasonable, Totterman's rationale and use of numbers to determine a trend. His statement that only 12 of the 94 species recorded on Boigu are predominantly New Guinea birds sounds like an overwhelming argument. But it is meaningless unless the number which are predominantly Australian is given for comparison thus recognising that the majority of the species are shared. It has not been possible for us to reconstruct precisely comparative lists which might be acceptable to Totterman because of omissions in his 'Comment' provided for the preparation of this response. For those species which he is prepared to accept as New Guinean, if we are following his numbers correctly, it appears he considers that there are another 14 species (24 minus 10), resident both in Australia and New Guinea but which are predominantly Australian. These are not named so it is difficult to comment critically on their selection. Thus, including the White-eye, it seems he reckons 15 of the 94 are predominantly Australian. The bias is rapidly reversed when species such as Tawny-breasted Honeyeater *Xanthotis flaviventer*, Brown-backed Honeyeater *Ramsayornis modestus* and Gurney's Eagle are transferred to the New Guinea side of the equation. When subspecific allegiances are considered, the balance is even more weighted towards New Guinea.

By our assessment, there are very few birds listed for Boigu which are rare elsewhere in the Trans-Fly and which might, therefore, in this context, be termed predominantly Australian. It is also pertinent to note that some typical Australian species which are found on islands in south-west Torres Strait but not in New Guinea, are also absent from Boigu. One example is Mistletoebird *Dicaeum hirundinaceum*.

Lest it be inferred from the above that the disputed statement was entirely the product of our own experience, we draw attention to the detailed analysis of species distribution by those experts on Torres Strait, Draffan et al. (1983). In concluding that 'The Torres Strait is a barrier between the avifaunas of Australia and New Guinea', they calculated that Cape York had 323 species, the Trans-Fly 407 and that only 282 of these are shared. Other relevant statements by these authors include:

- (i) 'Nearly two-thirds of the species found on the Trans-Fly Plains or on the northern part of Cape York Peninsula are shared, but for a quarter of these species the Strait appears to represent an insuperable barrier'.
- (ii) 'In fact nearly half the species shared by Australian and New Guinean rainforest are today effectively isolated by Torres Strait'.
- (iii) 'Forty per cent of the savanna species occurring in both Australia and New Guinea do not cross the Torres Strait'.

We agree with Totterman that species from other regions of New Guinea will be as rare on Boigu as elsewhere in the Trans-Fly. However, they should be more frequent there, and on other islands close to the New Guinea coast, than anywhere else in Australia. For visiting Australian observers, familiarity means that Australian species will always be detected more readily than insular New Guinea birds, and thus Australian birds will be over-represented on observers' lists.

This response enables us to correct an error we did make. We now know that ours was not the first Cicadabird *Coracina tenuirostris* reported from Boigu Island. Stephen Garnett recorded one there on 17 February 1987 (Redhead 1990). Other birds added to the Boigu list in February 1987 were Channel-billed Cuckoo *Scythrops novaehollandiae* and Little Kingfisher *Alcedo pusilla* (Redhead 1990). This brings the current total to 96.

## References

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