

## An Orange-bellied Fruit-Dove *Ptilinopus iozonus* on Boigu Island, Torres Strait: The First Record for Australian Territory

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### Summary

An Orange-bellied Fruit-Dove *Ptilinopus iozonus* was observed on Boigu Island in Torres Strait, far northern Queensland, on 15 and 16 November 2004. A series of photographs was obtained. These sightings constitute the first record of this distinctive species for Australian territory (Birds Australia Rarities Committee Case 442).

### Introduction

Boigu Island (7150 ha, 9°13'S, 142°13'E) is situated ~7 km off the coast of Papua New Guinea in the southern Trans Fly region. Despite its close proximity to Papua New Guinea, this is Australian territory administered by the State of Queensland. Boigu Island was formed by the deposit of alluvial soil from the rivers of Papua New Guinea (for an overview see Jennings 1972), and as a consequence is low-lying. A thin and irregular strip of dry vine scrub backs a broad coastal strip of mangroves, but the centre of the Island is predominantly open grassy *Pandanus* and *Melaleuca* plains. On the northern coast is a modern township with associated infrastructure (e.g. airstrip, water supply, dump) that occupies a small area of the available land. As part of an ongoing study of avian migration patterns within Torres Strait (see Clarke 2004), I visited Boigu Island between 13 and 18 November 2004.

### Sightings and description

On 15 November 2004 at 0740 h, while standing on grassland south of the Boigu Island airstrip and looking towards mangroves near the dump, I observed a small fruit-dove in flight. The bird was initially observed flying out of the mangroves and gaining height in front of my position. It flew out over the clearing for ~100 m before circling back toward the mangroves. The bird completed four or five of these circuits at heights of 50–100 m, as if building up the confidence to fly across the entire clearing, before setting off more directly and disappearing over mangroves towards the eastern end of the airstrip almost 1 km distant. Although this circling appeared to be an atypical flight pattern for a fruit-dove, it meant that the bird was in view for a considerable period (1–2 minutes), compared with most sightings of fruit-doves in flight. With the sun still climbing in the east, the bird was bathed in sunshine. At times as the bird circled even the ventral surface was well lit.

Even in flight and with no other nearby birds for reference, this bird was clearly small for a fruit-dove and smaller than the two small fruit-doves (Superb *Ptilinopus superbus* and Rose-crowned *P. regina* Fruit-Doves) with which I am familiar. Its

structure was typical for a fruit-dove: a small plump-bodied pigeon with a small rounded head, short thick neck, blunt rounded wings and short tail. In flight it appeared uniformly dark leaf-green, a shade or two darker than a male Eclectus Parrot *Eclectus roratus*, a bird that I had seen earlier in the day. With few exceptions all surfaces were green. The most striking of these exceptions was a bright-orange belly-patch, oval in shape, that was visible at a distance of 200+ m. The belly-patch, at least from a distance, appeared to be neat at its borders. Contiguous with the orange belly-patch, the vent and undertail-coverts were off-white or cream, and these feathers appeared unmarked. No tail-band was visible. No markings on the dorsal surface were noted, and the bare parts were not seen well enough to determine colour. Notes were written while I was sitting in the shade a few minutes after the sighting. I was convinced that I had seen an Orange-bellied Fruit-Dove *Ptilinopus iozonus*, but as this was a sighting by a single observer of a bird seen only in flight, and there were no photographs to support my claim, I felt that the record may have remained unconfirmed.

The following day at 1139 h while standing on the edge of mudflats just to the west of the Boigu Island dump I heard a distinctive four-note call, clearly that of a fruit-dove or pigeon. After moving back to a track just beyond the dump, I located the calling bird near the top of a tall (20+ m) mangrove on the edge of a large and extensive stand of mangroves (Plate 8 shows the bird at this location). The bird was recognisable as the same species, if not the same individual, as that seen in flight the previous day, and was immediately identified as an adult Orange-bellied Fruit-Dove. From its perch it did not seem very concerned by my presence, even though I was standing in the open just ~40 m from the base of the tree. Indeed, it called three or four times from this position whilst I watched. It then took flight and I was surprised when it flew slightly closer and perched in a much lower dead mangrove (~8 m tall) (Plate 9). Given a small amount of cover in the foreground, I was able to move closer (~20 m), and take additional photographs. Here it seemed more alert to my presence, but still called several times (Plate 9, above). At 1148 h I bent down to replace the flash-card in my camera, and when I looked up a few seconds later the bird was gone.

My description was essentially the same as the previous day but, as I was much closer, finer details were now noted. The bird was a small, dark leaf-green fruit-dove with a bright-orange belly-patch. In flight the belly-patch had appeared weakly oval; it now appeared squarer at the top and tapered to a flattish base where it met the cream of the vent and undertail-coverts (Plate 9, below). The apparent difference in the shape of the belly-patch between the flying bird seen the day before and the perched bird may be explained by the legs perhaps 'pinching' the abdominal area when extended to perch, instead of being tucked back in flight. The thighs were also noted as leaf-green although paler than other areas of green. The undertail-coverts, although essentially cream as noted the previous day, had a greenish hue and also showed scattered black flecks to the tips of some feathers. Close inspection of photographs reveals a grey terminal tail-band. However, at least when viewed from below, this tail-band is indistinct and therefore not a useful character in the field. Visible on the shoulder of the closed wing (carpal joint extending onto leading edge of inner wing) was a small patch of iridescent lilac feathering. The irides were off-white. The distal two-thirds of the bill was cream but the remainder, particularly the upper mandible in the vicinity of the nostrils, was a similar shade of lilac to that on the bird's shoulder. The legs and feet were dark flesh-pink. No red knob, or indeed any red on the head, was present.

The call was distinctive. My written description was 'WHOOO Wha WHOO



**Orange-bellied Fruit-Dove perched amongst foliage near the top of a tall mangrove on Boigu Island, 16 November 2004**

Plate 8

Photo: Rohan H. Clarke

WHOOO'. The first and third notes rose slightly, the second was short and clipped and the fourth fell slightly. The bird repeated the same series of four notes perhaps 10 times during the observation period. Plate 9 shows the posture of the bird when calling.

### **Identification and additional comments**

This description clearly identifies the bird as an Orange-bellied Fruit-Dove. Identification is straightforward as only one other fruit-dove in the region displays plumage that is similar (Gibbs *et al.* 2001). That species, the Red-knobbed Fruit-Dove *Ptilinopus insolitus*, displays a prominent red fleshy protuberance on the forehead and shows a larger, markedly more prominent, grey-blue area of feathering on the shoulder. Furthermore, the Red-knobbed Fruit-Dove is a vagrant to Papua New Guinea with just one record on the northern coast reported in Coates (1985). The bird can be identified as an adult Orange-bellied Fruit-Dove as juveniles are said to 'lack the distinctive pattern of adults' (Coates 1985). I interpret this to mean, at the very least, that juveniles do not display lilac feathering on the shoulder.

The call that I noted is similar to that reported for the species in the Port Moresby district (Coates 1985), except that in that region the call consists of five notes (not four). It is possible that I missed the first note in the series of five reported by Coates (1985), especially as it is described as 'brief, quiet and inaudible



**Orange-bellied Fruit-Dove perched in a dead mangrove on Boigu Island,  
16 November 2004. Photograph above shows bird calling.**

at a distance'. An alternative explanation may be that the dialect of the Orange-bellied Fruit-Dove in the southern Trans Fly region of Papua New Guinea does consist of four notes, as the call is said to vary from one part of the range to another (Coates 1985).

The Orange-bellied Fruit-Dove is common and widespread in southern Papua New Guinea (Coates & Peckover 2001), occurring from sea-level to 1000 m. In addition to rainforest and monsoon-forest, it is reported to occur in open habitat, forest edge, regrowth and mangroves (Coates 1985; Beehler *et al.* 1986). As it can be locally abundant, displays broad habitat preferences and occurs on some offshore islands (Coates 1985), the species' presence on Boigu Island just ~ 5 km from the Papua New Guinea mainland is hardly surprising. Following the unanimous acceptance of this record by the Birds Australia Rarities Committee (Case 442: T. Palliser *in litt.* 2006), this species joins a growing list of birds that sneak onto the Australian list because several islands within a 'stone's throw' of Papua New Guinea are Australian political territory.

### Acknowledgements

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