REMOTE PAPUA
NEW GUINEA

Tour Duration: 24 days
Group Size Limit: 7
Tour Category: Easy to Moderate for the most part, occasionally fairly Demanding

During this exciting tour we will visit some of the least-birded parts of Papua New Guinea, including the little-known Adelbert Range and the Huon Peninsula on the north coast of the mainland, and set foot on a whole range of islands with alluring names like New Ireland, Tench, Manus and D’Entrecasteaux. For the adventurous birder, a splendid array of exciting endemics is waiting in this little visited region.

Probably the main reason for the birder to travel to Papua New Guinea is the occurrence of what is, without a doubt, the most amazing bird family in existence, the birds of paradise. No other bird family shows such an incredible variety of nuptial plumages and such elaborate courtship displays. On this unusual tour we aim to find five of the least known members of this family.

On the D’Entrecasteaux islands, off the eastern tip of New Guinea, the gorgeous Goldie’s Bird of Paradise with its golden back and red plumes and the bizarre Curl-crested Manucode with its crinkled feathers and unusual twisted tail will be our targets.

On the Huon peninsula on the north coast we will search for three very restricted range species: the glorious Huon Astrapia with its superb glossy-purple tail, the magnificent Emperor Bird of Paradise with its white plumes and green bib, and the striking Wahnes’s Parotia with its brassy-coloured ‘pompom’.

The bowerbird family is also well represented in New Guinea and one of its most exquisite members is the fabled Fire-maned Bowerbird that we should find in the remote Adelbert Range.

Our standard tour to Papua New Guinea offers a splendid itinerary through the richest habitats of this huge island and neighbouring New Britain, but there are a lot of exciting birds apart from birds of paradise to be seen off the beaten track, especially on some of the outlying island groups.

Much of Papua New Guinea is still primitive and undeveloped, but tourism-level facilities are now very expensive indeed (only a few nights of this tour are in basic accommodations). Roads are rather poor and few and far between. There are some steep mountain trails to cope with in places, so you need to be determined to get the best from this adventure, as well as psychologically prepared for the inevitable logistical problems involved in trying to reach remote areas.

First we will explore the remote D’Entrecasteaux archipelago where, on Fergusson Island, we shall encounter Goldie’s Bird of Paradise and Curl-crested Manucode.

New Ireland holds nine endemics and shares another fourteen with New Britain, and in the densely forested mountains we will search for White-naped Lory, New Ireland Boobook, the marvellous Paradise Drongo and many others. A long boat trip will take us to the splendid island of Tench with its enormous seabird colonies and the rare Atoll Starling.

The next part of our adventure will see us travelling to rarely-visited Manus Island in the Admiralty Group, which holds eight endemics, of which the near-legendary Superb Pitta will be our most-wanted quarry.

We will then return to the mainland of Papua New Guinea to visit the Huon peninsula with its three endemic birds of paradise and many other interesting birds.

Our last port of call will be the Adelbert range near Madang, where the magnificent Fire-maned Bowerbird will be waiting for us.

Birdquest has operated tours to Papua New Guinea since 1986.

Itinerary

Day 1 The tour begins this morning at Port Moresby, from where we will take a flight to the town of Alotau, situated at the extreme southeastern tip of New Guinea.

Here we will explore a nearby area of pandanus savanna interspersed with
patches of rainforest.

Raggiana Birds of Paradise can be observed here, as can the shy Eastern Riflebird, whose growling calls emanate from the forest interior. A good selection of widespread New Guinea birds can also be found here and should include Whistling and Brahminy Kites, Slender-billed Cuckoo-Dove, Pink-spotted Fruit-Dove, Papuan Mountain Pigeon, Eastern Black-capped Lory, Red-flanked Lorikeet, Red-cheeked and gaudy Eclectus Parrots, Sulphur-crested Cockatoo, Pheasant Coucal, Uniform Swiftlet, Moustached Treeswift, Forest Kinglisher, Rainbow Bee-eater, Common Dollarbird, New Guinea Friarbird, Chestnut-breasted Mannikin, Singing and Metallic Starlings, Yellow-faced Myna, Brown Oriole, Hooded Butcherbird, Fawn-breasted Bowerbird and Glossy-mantled Manucode. With a bit of luck we will encounter the distinctive, red-naped crested Manucode is the largest of the five species of manucodes and is fairly common in the woodlands and forests. This subtly-plumed, glossy blue-black bird of paradise, which has a very peculiar tail, often sits in the open and betrays its presence by its mourning, rolling calls. The other endemic is Goldie’s Bird of Paradise, which belongs with the classic birds of paradise and resembles the better-known Raggiana Bird of Paradise. It favours both lowland and hill forest, and displays noisily in groups in the lower canopy. This species is much less shy than most of its congeners and only occurs on Fergusson and on nearby Normanby Island. It is named after the botanical collector Andrew Goldie, a Scotsman who lived in the 19th century.

Other species we should find here include Eastern Osprey, Wompoo Fruit-Dove, Pinon and Torresian Imperial Pigeons (in their hundreds), the antediluvian-looking Channel-billed Cuckoo, Northern Fantail, Yellow-bellied and Fairy Gerygones, Spangled Drongo, Shining Flycatcher, Little Shrike-Thrush, Black and Yellow-bellied Sunbirds, the distinctive, red-naped local race of Papua Black Myzomela, and Tawny-breasted and Brown-backed Honeyeaters.

Day 4 After some final birding on Fergusson we will return by boat to Alotau.

Day 5 A morning flight will take us back to Port Moresby, from where we will fly northeastwards to the town of Kavieng on New Ireland.

We will spend six nights in total on New Ireland, spending three nights at a guesthouse on the east coast in the Silom district and the rest of the time at a pleasant beach hotel in Kavieng.

Days 6-10 The long, narrow, oceanic island of New Ireland is very mountainous and is dominated by a high spine of peaks, which fall away precipitously to the sea along the southwestern coast. For most of its length of 350 kilometres (217 miles) it is less than 10 kilometres (6 miles) wide! On the east side the island is bordered by a narrow coastal strip with magnificent broad white sand beaches. There are, strangely enough, no active volcanoes on the island. The central Schleinitz range is still covered in thick forest, where rivers of crystal clear water tumble down the slopes.

New Ireland holds eight endemics and shares a further fourteen with New Britain. From our guesthouse near Silom we will have access to the nearby highlands of the Lelet plateau. At an altitude of about 750m (2461ft) we should find the uncommon New Ireland Myzomela in flowering trees and the gorgeous but rather shy Paradise (or New Ireland) Drongo (the smartest looking member of a usually rather drably-clad group). With a bit of luck we will encounter a White-naped Lory feeding in a flowering vine. At night we will go out, armed with a powerful spotlight, to find the vocal New Ireland Boobook. An undescribed Microeca flycatcher (known as ‘Bismarck Flyrobin’) lives here and we shall definitely try to get to grips with it. (The well-known Jacky Winter of Australia and the lovely Canary Flycatcher of Papua New Guinea belong to the same genus.) The New Ireland Friarbird usually favours higher altitudes than

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Nicobar Pigeon (Nik Borrow)
and to Manus Island and travels around in small flocks.

Other species here are likely to include Variable Goshawk, Black-billed Cuckoo-Dove, Stephan’s Ground-Dove, White-bibbed Fruit-Dove, Red-knobbed Imperial Pigeon, Coconut Lorikeet (split from Rainbow), Red-chinned Lorikeet, Song Parrot, Brush Cuckoo, Pacific (or Australian) Koel, Glossy Swiftlet, Collared Kingfisher, Common Cicadabird, Golden-headed Cisticola, the eye-catching Golden Monarch, Red Myzomela (or Red-tinted Honeyeater), Long-tailed Myna and Bismarck (or Island) Crow.

Grassy areas in the lowlands often hold the endemic Forbes’s (or New Ireland) Mannikin, often accompanied by the Bismarck-endemic Buff-bellied Mannikin.

The pleasant town of Kavieng is surrounded on three sides by the sea and will be our base for the last part of our explorations. In the surrounding secondary growth habitat we should encounter the endemic Hunstein’s Mannikin (or Mottled Munia) and also Rufous-tailed Bush-hen, Finsch’s (or Green) Pygmy Parrot, Bismarck Hanging-Parrot and Common Kingfisher.

Provided weather, sea and boat conditions allow, we will visit the distant island of Tench (or Enus Island), situated about 100 kilometres (60 miles) to the north in the Pacific Ocean. At sea we will hope to encounter Wedge-tailed Shearwater, Black-naped Tern and some Indo-Pacific Bottle-nosed Dolphins. The island itself covers less than one square kilometre and holds a small village as well as a large seabird colony. The main species are Red-footed Booby, Greater Frigatebird and Black Noddy. The elegant White-tailed Tropicbird, Brown Noddy and the dazzling White Tern nest in small numbers. However, our main target here will be the localized Atoll Starling, which only occurs here and at a few other localities. It is a specialist of extremely small islands and is only known from six islands, which together cover a mere 44 square kilometres. The total population is less than 2500 birds. Another important and luckily fairly common species is the tiny Bismarck Black (or Ebony) Myzomela, which only occurs on islets in the Bismarck Archipelago. Other interesting species include Brown Booby, Lesser Frigatebird, Eastern Reef Egret, Melanesian Megapode (or Melanesian Scrubfowl), Greater Crested and Bridled Terns, the cute Yellow-bibbed Fruit-Dove, Pacific Imperial Pigeon, the always spectacular Nicobar Pigeon (deliciously common here) and Island Monarch.

Day 11 After some final birding in New Ireland we will take a flight to the isolated island of Manus. We will fly to the airstrip of Momote, on the offshore island of Los Negros – a relic of WWII – and then transfer to the main town of Lorengau, the provincial capital, for a three nights stay.

Days 12-13 Manus is the main island of the Admiralty Archipelago, which forms the western end of the Bismarcks. It is 104 kilometres (65 miles) long and 28 kilometres (17 miles) wide and consists of limestone hills which are still mainly covered in primary forest. The highest summit on the island is Mount Dremsel (720m or 2362ft), Manus Island is a steamy, sleepy place situated within a few degrees of the equator. Manus is defined by BirdLife International as the main part of Endemic Bird Area 193, which holds seven endemics and two near-endemics. Our most spectacular target species on the island is the Superb (or Black-headed) Pitta, which is locally known as Cou Cou or Ku Ku, an obviously onomatopoeic name. The 32 species of pittas (family Pittidae) are amongst the most wanted and most valued of tropical birds and the Superb Pitta is one of the least known of this gorgeous assemblage. The total population is tiny and virtually nothing has been written on the ecology of this species, which is treated as Vulnerable by BirdLife International. We have a good chance of locating this magnificent creature in the dense bamboo thickets it favours.

Endemic, noisy Manus (or White-naped) Friarbirds (or Chaukas) and handsome Manus (or Admiralty Pied) Monarchs will accompany us on our walks. The localized Meek’s Pygmy-Parrot, which also occurs on the Saint Matthias Islands, feeds on lichens and behaves a bit like a nuthatch. The Manus Cuckoo-Shrike (sometimes split from the widespread White-bellied Cuckoo-Shrike) favours open country and forest edges. At night we will hope find the endemic Manus Boobook, which should betray its presence by its throaty, guttural calls. The other nightbird on Manus is the endemic Manus Masked Owl, but nothing is known about this bird and the last reliable sighting was in 1934! The Manus (or Admiralty Rufous) Fantail used to be common on the island, but is nowadays only known from several offshore islets, so on one day we will travel by boat to one of these to add this lovely little endemic to our tally.

Other species which we should observe on Manus include White-bellied Sea-
Day 14 Today we will catch a flight to Port Moresby and then fly onwards to the town of Lae for an overnight stay.

Day 15 This morning we will take a flight to the little town of Wasu on the north coast of the Huon Peninsula. Upon arrival we will drive into the mountains for a four nights stay in a small village. This afternoon we will begin our exploration of the surrounding area. The track above the village reaches 1950m (6398ft) at the pass and it is here that we will enter the submontane and montane forests of the fabled Huon peninsula.

Days 16-18 On the map the Huon Peninsula looks like a giant wart on the back of Papua New Guinea. It is dominated by three impressive mountain ranges, which are separated from the central spine of New Guinea: the Finisterre, Saruwaged (or Sarawaget) and Rawlinson Ranges. These consist of coral limestone and reach an amazing 4212m (13,820ft) at their highest point. They are still mainly covered in montane and subalpine forest, with alpine grassland occurring above the treeline at about 3000m (9843ft).

The Huon forms part of BirdLife’s Endemic Bird Area 177, which also encompasses the nearby Adelbert Range. Four species of birds are endemic to the Huon and another is shared with the Adelbert Mountains. The gorgeous Emperor Bird of Paradise belongs with the ‘classical’ birds of paradise and displays in noisy groups in the forest canopy of the lower hill forest. Witnessing the bizarre display of these splendid creatures will be one of our main targets here. The marvellous Huon Astrapia is a more montane species in which the males are adorned by a long and beautiful purplish tail. They display quietly in the treetops and often gather at favourite fruiting trees. The third localized bird of paradise, the marvellous Wahnes’ Parotia, also occurs in the nearby Adelbert Range. It is a mid-montane species that builds its dance court on the ground. This is the rarest and shyest of the three restricted range birds of paradise, but we will definitely put in the necessary amount of effort to get good views.

The large endemic Spangled Honeyeater, with its striking yellow-orange facial wattle, is another frugivore which is fairly common in the area. The last Huon endemic is the montane Huon Melidectes, which normally occurs above the altitudes we will be able to reach and so we would be very fortunate indeed to encounter this species.

Other species occurring in these epiphyte-laden and moss-encrusted forests include Black-mantled Goshawk, Brown Falcon, Great Cuckoo-Dove, Ornate Fruit-Dove, Rufescent Imperial Pigeon, Dusty Lory, the smart Papuan Lorikeet, Orange-billed Lorikeet, Red-breasted Pygmy-Parrot, the inscrutable Vulturine Parrot, Mountain Swiftlet, Mountain Kingfisher, Hooded and Black-bellied Cuckoo-shrikes, the unique Blue-capped Irisia, White-shouldered Fairy-Wren, Brown-breasted Gerygone, Buff-faced Scrub-Wren, Friendly and Black Fantails, Black Monarch, the endearing Black-breasted Boatbill, Lemon-bellied and Canary Flycatchers, Blue-grey Robin, Mottled, Regent, Slaters’ and Brown-backed Whistlers, the nuthatch-like Papuan Sittella (split from Varied), Red-capped Flowerpecker, the superb Tit Berryepecker (representing one of three endemic New Guinea families), Mid-mountain, Fan-tailed and Spotted Berryeckers (members of another endemic family), Black-fronted White-eye, Black-throated, Marbled and Rufous-backed Honeyeaters, Scrub White-eared Meliphaga, Red-collared and Mountain Red-headed Myzomelas, Cinnamon-browed Melidectes, Great Woodswallow, the retiring Macgregor’s Bowerbird and Superb Bird of Paradise.

Day 19 After some final birding in the Huon we will fly to the town of Madang, where we will board the 4x4 vehicles that will take us along a rough track deep into the mountains of the Adelbert Range to our small guesthouse for a three nights stay.

Days 20-21 The fabled black, red and yellow Firemaned Bowerbird is one of the rarest and one of the most dazzling and baffling birds of New Guinea and is restricted to altitudes between 900 and 1450m in the Adelbert Range. Its small bower was only described in 1986 and its display behaviour and nest remain largely unknown. One or two of these special birds regularly visit the fruiting fig trees near our guesthouse, so we stand a very good chance of adding this dramatic species to our lifelists. The unobtrusive Banded Yellow Robin leads a quiet life in the forest under storey and is usually detected by its mellow trill. We will also try to observe the timid Brown-headed (or Brown-capped) Jewel-Babbler here. This form used to be considered a subspecies of the Blue Jewel-Babbler, but the female looks very different and the male has a dissimilar song. Like the other members of its genus, it is secretive and we will need to work a bit to entice it into view. A display tree of Lesser Birds of Paradise is situated nearby and there are usually several adult males in attendance. The fabulous Magnificent Bird of Paradise is not uncommon here and with a modicum of luck we will see a male in a fruiting tree or even at his display court. We will also hear the raucous calls of the Brown-collared Brush-Turkey on our wanderings in the area, but seeing this retiring forest denizen is another matter.

Other species that we may well encounter include Orange-bellied Fruit-Dove, Zoe Imperial Pigeon, the magnificent Palm Cockatoo, Western Black-capped Lory, Rufous-bellied Kookaburra, Stout-billed Cuckoo-Shrike, Black-browed Triller, the sneaky Rusty Mouse-warbler, the unobtrusive Green-backed Gerygone, Ochre-collared Monarch, Plain Honeyeater, New Guinea White-eye, the secretive White-eared Cathbird and Grey Crow. At night we will try to get good views of the endearing Marbled Frogmouth.

Day 22 After some final birding in the Adelbert mountains, we will return to Madang for a two nights stay.

Day 23 This morning we will visit a nice stretch of lowland forest near Madang where we have a fair chance of encountering the snazzy-looking Edward’s Fig-Parrot. This beautiful bird is restricted to northeastern New Guinea and favours large fig trees. We may also find Double-eyed Fig-Parrot, Common Paradise Kingfisher, Common Golden Whistler and Mimic Meliphaga.

In the afternoon we will explore a small offshore island where New Guinea Scrubfowl can be found. Coroneted Fruit-Dove and Mangrove Golden Whistler also inhabit the island.

Day 24 Morning flight to Port Moresby, where the tour ends.
Accommodation & Road Transport: The hotels are mostly of good or medium standard. The small hotels or guesthouses in the Silom district on New Ireland and in the Adelbert Range are fairly simple. In the Huon Peninsula (4 nights) we will have to stay in basic village accommodation, with primitive washing/toilet facilities. While visiting the D’Entrecasteaux Islands we will travel on a comfortable boat (that usually caters for scuba divers) with cabins available for single or double occupancy. Road transport is by minibus or 4x4 vehicle. Roads are rather poor and few and far between, but then we do not have to travel long distances on them.

Walking: The walking effort is mostly easy to moderate, but there are some steep and fairly strenuous trails in some areas.

Climate: Generally warm or hot, dry and sunny at lower altitudes, but cooler in upland areas. Overcast weather is quite regular and there is very likely to be some rain, perhaps heavy at times. It will be humid.

Bird Photography: Opportunities are worthwhile.

Important: Flight schedules in Papua New Guinea change frequently, and delays are also not uncommon, so participants need to be aware of this and have a flexible and relaxed approach. Changes to the order in which the localities are visited are almost inevitable and changes to the amount of time in each area may also occur. The itinerary has a built-in safety margin to allow for such eventualities.