

Meet the neighbours



From its high mountains to its deep valleys, Papua New Guinea boasts the most exotic birdlife

STELLA MARTIN

THEIR raucous calls resonate through the forest but I can see nothing. There must be several birds in the trees around us and Daniel, our guide, indicates a vine-entwined tree and tells us to watch.

A raggiana bird of paradise is perching on the vine. It's big and bushy, its head precisely divided between green and yellow, but that is where orderliness ends.

The bird's back and tail is an ebullient bouffant, a bustle of tousled and gauzy orange plumes. As it hops up the vine, another male flies on to an adjacent perch and excitement levels reach fever pitch; there must be a female in the vicinity. Bouncing with ardour, our birds fan their wings, hunch their shoulders and hoist their plumes, flaring them out above their backs like great orange fountains.

This bird is emblematic of Papua New Guinea and appears on everything from the flag and the national airline's livery to the most popular beer can. Daniel has brought us to a *lek*, an area where males congregate to compete for the attentions of females that have come to inspect and choose a mate. I don't know how they make up their minds when there can be as many as 10 males strutting their flamboyant stuff.

I have joined a tour of PNG to see these fabled birds of paradise but I have other motives: Port Moresby is the closest capital city to my home in Cairns (much closer than Brisbane) and I've always had a hankering to meet the neighbours.

Back in our minibus, Daniel makes a startling disclosure. "I used to hunt birds... two or three hundred a week, with bow and arrow, for their meat and their feathers. But now," he says, smiling, "I just hunt them for the birders." You can tell that Daniel, a confident highland man with keen eyes and an assertive beard, is a hunter. He melts into the forest, moving silently and stealthily,

alert to every flutter and tweet.

Daniel is the first of several guides with whom we link up. These experts not only lead us to the birds but provide security. PNG is not always considered a safe place to travel and we never put to the test warnings not to venture out unaccompanied. However, wherever we go — albeit in the presence of guides who know the local people — we are greeted with overwhelming warmth.

Birdwatching tends to take you off the beaten track. From Port Moresby we fly west to Kiunga, where we walk in the footsteps of David Attenborough to the tree where he was filmed at a *lek* of greater birds of paradise, a yellow-plumed variation of the raggianas. Here we are treated to another astonishing display.

Then we proceed by boat up the meandering Fly River. Rainforest crowds the banks as eclectic parrots, palm cockatoos and red-cheeked parrots (sought-after rarities on Queensland's Cape York) fly overhead in the company of hornbills.

The few people we encounter are paddling or fishing from dug-out canoes. These self-sufficient locals meet most of their needs — from fish traps, nets, bows and arrows to dwellings, boats and bridges — with skilful use of materials from their local environment. Kwatu Lodge, our base for three nights, is perched high on the riverbank, and this substantial structure is constructed entirely from forest materials woven expertly around a frame of saplings. It has no electricity or running water but those are small deprivations for spending time in this remote location.

From Kwatu Lodge, we drift along the river or slog steamily through the forest. Birding in PNG is hard work. Given their value as food and decoration, the birds are understandably elusive, but the rewards are often spectacular. Near the lodge a hide, built from palm fronds, overlooks



A raggiana bird of paradise fans its orange plumes in a gaudy mating display



DOUG MAURO

The flame bowerbird appears to be lit from within

the bower of a flame bowerbird. We spend more than three hours in this leafy igloo before our patience is rewarded with sightings of a bird so stunningly plumaged in incandescent orange and golden yellow it appears to be lit from within.

The rest of our tour is spent in relative luxury and cooler climes.

Kumul Lodge, an hour's drive into the mountains from Mt Hagen, is set in a protected area of misty upland forest festooned with mosses and orchids and inhabited by yet another suite of astonishingly beautiful birds. Seeing them is easy as many strut the stage on a feeding table next to the lodge. But it is in the forest we find the male



DOUG MAURO

Huli men traditionally sport elaborate headdress

ribbon-tailed astrapia, a bafflingly extravagant bird with iridescent purple and green head and breast and, for a tail, 2m-long white streamers that flutter behind as he flies and thread through the foliage after him as he searches for food above our astonished heads.

While waiting for our flight out of Mt Hagen I buy a *bilum*, one of

the ubiquitous string bags used to carry everything from yams to babies and pigs. This airport shopping opportunity is in the carpark, its perimeter fence decked out with a dazzling display of vibrant and imaginative designs.

I ask the woman who has made my chosen *bilum* to pose with it, knotted across her forehead in the traditional way, and am suddenly jostled by onlookers all eager to insert themselves into the photograph.

At our final stop, Tari, we disembark, like royalty, to find the perimeter fence of the airstrip crammed with locals; plane arrivals are evidently a public spectacle. This is home of the Huli people, famous for their wigmen, one of whom is the baggage handler. An orange safety vest is his only concession to modern workwear. His nether regions are barely covered with a skirt of fibre and animal hair; around his neck he wears cassowary quill necklaces and pigs' tusks; and his hair, sprouting from the confines of a beaded headband like a well-risen muffin, forms a mushroom-shaped frizzy mass.

The Huli people are proud of their traditions. Growing a wig is a spiritual undertaking, after which the hair is shaved and used as the basis for elaborate headdresses. Huli men are dandies: those without wigs deck their heads in everything from colourful crocheted caps to concoctions of beads, flattened parrots, bird of paradise plumes or cassowary feathers. Lacking these, they simply pluck ferns and other vegetation from the forest and weave them into elaborate crowns for everyday wear.

The men model not only their decorations on the birds of paradise but their lifestyle, seduction is a priority and child-rearing is strictly for the women, along with

pig-rearing and food production. Benson, our local guide, has two wives. "My first wife has three children. She was too busy to look after my pigs so I got another to do that." When Benson has saved up another 30 pigs, which is the going rate for a bride, he will get another to look after his vegetable gardens.

The modern world has come suddenly to the Huli. A gas pipeline being constructed through their land has brought prosperity to some and jealousy to neighbours. We find ourselves sharing the rather luxurious Ambua Lodge with a multinational workforce that is whisked away to work in helicopters each dawn while the Huli people, with neither motorbikes nor bicycles, mostly walk.

Flying homewards I gaze down on vast tracts of forest covering the crumpled, inaccessible mountains that make up so much of the country. I am heartened. Down there, where there are no roads or towns, who knows what wondrous birds are flaunting their plumes or even how our great silver bird might be interpreted by people who may be living remotely in that forest.

Stella Martin is the author of *Australian Wildlife* (Bradt, \$29.95).

Checklist

Independent travel in Papua New Guinea would be difficult, and possibly risky, and finding birds virtually impossible without local guides. Cassowary Tours runs birding trips. More: cassowarytours.com.au. Good birding lodges include upmarket Ambua Lodge: babs.com.au/ambua; Kumul Lodge: pngoholidays.com.au/kumul-lodge-birdwatching and Kwatu Lodge: flyriverecotourism.com.



DENIS WALLS

Ambua Lodge in the Huli people's heartland