Papua New Guinea's Birds of Paradise and Culture

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1/2	Depart London / in flight
Day 3	Arrive Port Moresby, afternoon birding at PAU
Day 4	Varirata National Park
Day 5/7	Rondon Ridge
Day 8/10	Karawari Lodge
Day 11/13	Lake Murray
Day 14	Transfer to Port Moresby
Day 15	Depart Port Moresby
Day 16	Arrive UK

Departs
September

Focus
Papua New Guinea's birdlife, natural history and culture

Grading
Grade B. Moderately easy day walks but some trails are steep and can become muddy or slippery making them difficult to negotiate. One trail at Rondon Ridge is a hard walk.

Dates and Prices
See website (tour code PNG01) or brochure





From top: Raggiana Bird of Paradise and Ribbon-tailed Astrapia

Naturetrek Mingledown Barn Wolf's Lane Chawton Alton Hampshire GU34 3HJ UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051 E: info@naturetrek.co.uk W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Introduction

New Guinea is the second largest island in the world and contains the third largest expanse of tropical forest after the Amazon and Congo rainforests. The landscape is dramatic and high rainfall and associated high rates of sedimentation have formed a complex assemblage of mountain ranges (to above 3000m (9,900ft) above sea level), broad coastal plains and a complex and productive network of rivers. The Central Cordillera stretches unbroken for 1,600km (not dropping below 1,000m), almost the length of the island. New Guinea is a biodiversity hotspot and a major centre of endemism. The island has an estimated 25,000 species of vascular plant (c. 10% of the world's species, with more than 70% endemic), almost 1,000 species of butterfly, 219 species of freshwater fish, 320 species of frog, 384 species of reptile, 780 species of bird and 245 species of mammal. And all of these remarkable totals are conservative as the island remains poorly known ecologically, with large areas completely un-surveyed. Many known species remain un-described, and hence un-named, and entirely new species are found whenever survey work is conducted in new areas. For example, a 2013 survey of the Hindenburg Range found six frog species new to science from just 24 species recorded at three locations. New Guinea is tremendously exciting for both what is known and unknown of its biodiversity.



This tour focuses on several of the most rewarding locations in Papua New Guinea (PNG), which occupies the eastern half of the island, with Indonesian Irian Jaya (the provinces of Papua and West Papua) in the west. Eighty percent of PNG, c. 28 million hectares (69 million acres), is forested. We will encounter a wide range of vegetation and habitat types and a bewildering variety of invertebrates including colourful butterflies, intricate moths and extraordinary beetles. However, with the occasional cultural interlude (PNG's diverse cultures are also fascinating) we will focus primarily on birds. New Guinea and its satellite islands have the world's largest concentration of endemic bird species (c. 47%) and endemism on the mainland is highest along the Central Cordillera, which we will visit during the tour. PNG holds many of the birds-of-paradise, perhaps the most extraordinary family of all the world's birds. Although their incredible displays are often shown on television, to watch them in real life is a never-to-be-forgotten and truly unique experience. This tour takes us into the range of at least 17 species of bird-of-paradise and the search for these avian gems will be the driving force of many of our days. To whet your appetite, Laman and Scholes' (2012) photographic *tour de force*, Cooper and Forshaw's (1977) combination of art and biology and Frith and Beehler's (1998) scientific work, with the legendary Bill Cooper's artwork, are all recommended reading.


Crested Satinbird

Due to some recent taxonomic revisions, New Guinea is now home to seven endemic bird families, members of all of which we may see. These include the somewhat enigmatic Mottled Berrypecker, Wattled Ploughbill and Blue-crowned Ifrit (three monotypic families), the very attractive Painted Berrypeckers and the satinbirds, which until recently were considered birds of paradise. Other notable birds include the cassowaries, megapodes, a fantastic collection of multi-hued and physically diverse pigeons, parrots and kingfishers, a challenging array of beautiful and often skulking terrestrial species such as pittas, jewel babblers and forest rails, the behaviourally fascinating bowerbirds and a great range of fairywrens, honeyeaters, monarchs and fantails. We are indeed fortunate to have the recently published second edition of the *Birds of New Guinea* by Pratt and Beehler (2015), which ended years of somewhat inadequate and/or unavailable field guide coverage of the birds

We will also do our best to see mammals, reptiles and frogs. PNG has some quite charismatic mammals, such as tree-kangaroos, and a surprising variety of wallabies, cuscuses, ringtailed-possums, carnivorous marsupials, bandicoots, rats and bats but most are nocturnal, many require handling to identify and most are sought after as food, which affects their abundance and detectability. Hence mammals are not usually an obvious feature in PNG but we may be lucky. More than a handful of identified species will be considered a bonus. The reptiles and frogs are easier to find but not necessarily to identify due to a comparative lack of reference material. Some of the reptile species are quite impressive and indeed the varanid lizards (monitors) and pythons are the largest terrestrial predators in the country. We will do our best to find both the big and small.


Coppery Ring-tailed Possum

From the capital Port Moresby we initially travel a short distance to Varirata National Park to bird-watch in the foothills, then fly to the mountains to search for montane species. After three nights in the cool conditions at Rondon Ridge Lodge in the Western Highlands we will return to the hot, humid lowlands and stay at Karawari Lodge in East Sepik Province. We then go west to Lake Murray, the lake is the largest in PNG. Following a three night stay here, we return to Port Moresby, prior to departure for home.

Note that most birds are shy and often hard to see, with many skulkers. The logistics are prone to delays and changes (expect the unexpected is the catch-cry in PNG) and it is often very hot and

humid. Nonetheless, the birding and cultural rewards can be so immense in this little-visited part of the world that the experience will live with you forever.

Itinerary

Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1-2 In flight

We depart from London Heathrow on an overnight scheduled flight to Singapore or Hong Kong where we connect with another overnight flight, crossing more time zones, to Port Moresby, arriving early the following morning.

Day 3 Arrive Port Moresby & PAU

From the international airport we will transfer to the nearby multi award-winning Airways Hotel. In the afternoon we will travel to the grounds of the Pacific Adventist University (PAU), a well-known birding site about 30 minutes' drive from the hotel. PAU, set in a landscape of dry woodland typical of the Port Moresby area, has small patches of riparian vegetation, open spaces and a number of waterbodies. Here we will be introduced to some Australo-Papuan bird families through species such as Black-backed Butcherbird, Fawn-breasted Bowerbird, White-shouldered Fairywren, Helmeted Friarbird and Rufous-banded and Yellow-tinted Honeyeaters. We will also search for Red-cheeked Parrot, Papuan Frogmouth, Blue-winged Kookaburra and Yellow-faced Myna, among others. The ponds should provide a variety of waterbirds such as Pied Heron, Nankeen Night Heron, Little Black Cormorant, Plumed and Wandering Whistling Ducks, Dusky Moorhen and Comb-crested Jacana.


Papuan Frogmouth

Day 4 Varirata National Park

This morning we will leave early for a full day's birding in Varirata National Park, an hour's drive away in the foothills, up to 800m. Varirata was PNG's first national park and provides an excellent introduction to birding in New Guinea forest. Indeed, it is one of the premier sites in the country with a long list of species, somewhat surprisingly considering how close it is to Port Moresby. There are a variety of habitats and a series of good trails will take us into the wetter evergreen hill forest. We should see a selection of fruit-doves, cuckooshrikes, kingfishers, honeyeaters, Australasian warblers and flycatchers of various families. The avifauna will be excitingly unfamiliar and could include an endemic New Guinea family, the berrypeckers and longbills (Melanocharitidae), as well as pitohuis, jewel babblers, gerygones, monarchs, whistlers and myzomelas. The early start will improve our chances of seeing a displaying Raggiana Bird-of-paradise, an iconic lekking species that is PNG's national bird. Other possible bird of paradise species (Paradisaeidae being a target family for the tour) today are Growling Riflebird (recently split from the more widespread Magnificent Riflebird) and the Crinkle-collared Manucode, a less flamboyant, somewhat crow-like species. We will also search for some rarer, or simply shyer, possibilities such as Yellow-legged Brushturkey, Barred Owlet-Nightjar (at roost), Brown-headed Paradise-Kingfisher, Chestnut-backed Jewel Babbler and Painted Quail-Thrush. The night will again be spent at Airways Hotel.



Frilled Monarch

Days 5 – 7 Rondon Ridge

Today we depart Central Province and fly from Port Moresby to Mount Hagen in the Western Highlands Province. We will be staying for three nights at Rondon Ridge Lodge, one of PNG's premier lodges, located on Mount Kuta and overlooking Wahgi Valley, which has some of the oldest evidence of agriculture anywhere in the world. The lodge is just less than an hour's drive from the airport and we will be accommodated in separate units from where we can enjoy some of the bird-watching available in the surrounding grounds. The cool conditions will be quite a contrast to Port Moresby, (Rondon Ridge is at 2100m), as will be the bird assemblage.



Rondon Ridge Lodge

There are trails in the surrounding forest and close by the lodge may be found Greater Lophorina (previously known as Superb Bird-of-paradise), Brown Sicklebill, Princess Stephanie's Astrapia,

MacGregor's Bowerbird, Red-collared and Mountain Myzomelas, Common Smoky Honeyeater and Yellow-browed Melidectes.

We will spend a full day birding in the high altitude forest behind Rondon Ridge. Possible species near the lodge, in addition to those mentioned above, include Mountain Fruit-Dove, Goldie's Lorikeet, Orange-crowned Fairywren, Yellow-streaked Honeyeater, Black-breasted Boatbill, Loria's Satinbird, Friendly and Dimorphic Fantails, Wattled Ploughbill, Blue-capped Ifrita, Black Pitohui, Blue-faced Parrotfinch and the elusive and taxonomically enigmatic Mottled Berryhunter (now a monotypic family, Rhagologidae). We will also search for skulking terrestrial species such as Forbe's Forest-Rail, Lesser Melampitta and Lesser Ground Robin. Further afield we may increase our bird-of-paradise species list with Black and Black-billed Sicklebills, King of Saxony Bird-of-paradise (with its extraordinary head plumes) and Short-tailed Paradigalla. Loria's Satinbird, along with Crested and Yellow-breasted Satinbirds, was considered a bird of paradise but the three species are now considered to belong to an endemic New Guinea family, the Cnemophilidae. Which is even more reason to want to see one. At night we may search the lodge grounds for nocturnal species such as Papuan Boobook and Large-tailed Nightjar.


King of Saxony Bird-of-paradise

One day we will travel to Kumul Lodge for a half-day bird tour, prior to spending the afternoon visiting a some of the local tribes. Kumul Lodge is famous for a bird-feeding table that attracts Brehm's Tiger-Parrot, Princess Stephanie's and Ribbon-tailed Astrapias, Brown Sicklebill, Belford's Melidectes and Common Smoky Honeyeater, among others. This provides excellent photographic opportunities. The lodge gardens also hold other montane species (the lodge is at 2860m), including Crested Satinbird, Island Thrush, Grey-streaked Honeyeater and White-winged Robin. Crested Berrypecker, which belongs to yet another endemic New Guinea family, the Painted berrypeckers (Paramythiidae), may be found near the lodge. Calaby's Pademelon (a small forest wallaby) is also occasionally seen on the lodge lawns and Speckled Dasyure (a small carnivorous marsupial) sometimes visits the feeding table during the day.


Brown Sicklebill

There are a number of tribal groups around Mount Hagan and we will take time to visit one or two of these during our time at Rondon Ridge.


Melpa People

The Melpa People are one of the last large groups to be brought into the world community, with the area not discovered by the outside world until 1934. In many ways the lifestyle in this area of Papua New Guinea remains relatively unchanged today. These people were among the world's first horticulturists and even today sweet potato gardening is the basis for many things in the area, such as trade. Pigs are a sign of wealth among the Melpa people and it is not uncommon to see women looking after the family pigs and tending to their sweet potato gardens.

The Melpa people are referred to as pre-adapted to capitalism, demonstrating a form of ebullient materialism. Their leaders are mankind's quintessential entrepreneurs, amassing wealth in extended systems of ceremonial exchange, called moka or tee. Ceremonial exchanges became the measure of a man and men begged and borrowed from their clansmen to sponsor a great moka or tee ceremony. The bigger the presentation, the bigger the man. Trade partners accepted gifts, only to become obliged to reciprocate in the future. However the trick with moka or tee is the need to return an equal amount plus more. It is a system of incremental exchange, not of balance. People are locked into escalating relations of generosity and debt.

Another group are the mud men of Polga Village. The greatest change within the Melpa people has been the suppression of inter-group warfare. The traditional cultural values which placed importance on battle skills, sorcery and ritual cult knowledge have given way to more material prestige, however, many of the old customs are still practiced and an encounter with the Papua New Guinea Mud Men will be a truly unforgettable experience.


Mud men

There is also a small group of the Huli tribe or "wigmen" within the Wahgi Valley, who paint their faces and wear exotic wigs made from their own hair, decorated with plumes from birds of paradise, cassowaries and parrots. Although these adornments are only worn for special ceremonies we shall take time to visit the local tribesmen and learn about the various styles of wigs and the cultural significance of each.

Days 8 – 10 Karawari Lodge

We leave the mountains and fly to Karawari Lodge in the lowlands of East Sepik Province. Karawari Lodge is situated on a ridge overlooking the Karawari River, a tributary of the Sepik. We will stay for three nights in cabins overlooking the river and a vast expanse of lowland forest. Bird species we may expect to see around the lodge include Blyth's Hornbill, Eclectus Parrot, Rufous-bellied Kookaburra, Lowland Peltops, Black-browed Triller, Black Sunbird, Sulphur-crested Cockatoo and the fantastic Palm Cockatoo. A boat will be used to access birding sites and for birding along the river and some creeks.


White-bellied Sea Eagle

The Karawari River is a good location for White-bellied Sea Eagle, Brahminy Kite, Oriental Dollarbird, Great-billed Heron, Azure Kingfisher, Red-cheeked Parrot and Pinon's Imperial Pigeon, and riparian birds such as Shining Flycatcher and Green-backed Gerygone. But our target species along the river will be Twelve-wired Bird-of-paradise, which we hope to see at its display site. We will also venture into the forest. Lowland swamp forest is the home of the magnificent Victoria Crowned Pigeon, Wompoo and Orange-bellied Fruit-Doves, Hooded Pitta, New Guinea Scrubfowl, White-bellied Thicket Fantail and Ivory-billed Coucal. The nearby hill forest has Yellow-billed Kingfisher, Blue Jewel Babbler, Rusty Pitohui, Ochre-collared Monarch and King Bird-of-paradise. We may also search for secretive and/or uncommon species such as Northern Cassowary, New Guinea Flightless Rail, New Guinea Harpy-Eagle and Magnificent Riflebird. At night we will have the opportunity to spotlight around the lodge for species such as Papuan Frogmouth, as well as a variety of geckos and frogs.

Days 11 – 13 Lake Murray Lodge

There may be a little time this morning for some early birding around the lodge grounds. After breakfast we will return to the airstrip for our charter flight to Lake Murray Lodge. This is a fairly new lodge, located in the south west of the country, towards the border with West Papua. We will arrive at the lodge in time for lunch, before heading out for an afternoon excursion. With over 2,000 km of shoreline, there is a habitat for over 150 bird species that have been recorded here. The surrounding land is a mixture of grassland, savannah, forest and swamp. The swamps in the area are also rumoured to hide prehistoric creatures, thought to be related to theropod dinosaurs, referred to as Lake Murray's own 'Nessie'.


Lake Murray Sunset

We are likely to see a variety of kingfisher, wildfowl, egrets and swifts around the lake, as well as a good diversity of birds on land. Five bird of paradise species have been recorded in the area, including Trumpet Manucode, Magnificent Riflebird and King Bird-of-Paradise.



Spotted Whistling Duck

The lodge has twelve individual cabin rooms that over look the lake, each with a veranda and view over the water, as well as modern en-suite bathrooms. It operates on solar power for sustainability, and much of the fruit and vegetables are grown on site.

We will then have two full days to explore the habitats, waters and villages around Lake Murray. Local people mainly get around in dug out canoes, using these to access their stilted homes on some of the islands. The lake sustains a large population of fish, one of the staple foods of the island communities.

Day 14 Port Moresby

After a final early morning around Lake Murray Lodge, we must depart for our return flight back to Port Moresby, via Mount Hagan. If time permits in Port Moresby we may have the opportunity for some afternoon birding but much depends on the timing of the flight. Once again we will overnight at Airways Hotel.

Day 15 Depart Port Moresby

This morning we depart from Port Moresby international airport and fly to Singapore as the first leg of our homeward journey.

Day 16 Arrive UK

After our flight via Singapore we will arrive back at Heathrow from a truly memorable tour.

Images courtesy of Shutterstock, A Steel & PNG Tours

Grading

This is a grade B tour is comprised mainly of relatively easy short and half-day walks. However, depending on rain, some of the trails can be very muddy and must be negotiated with care. There is one scheduled walk, looking for Black Sicklebill and other birds-of-paradise at Rondon Ridge, which should be considered Grade B/C hike. This typically begins before dawn and involves following a track up towards the top of the ridge which includes some steeper sections, going up a number of steps and across smal wooden bridges. Depending on sightings, we could well be out for most of the day. Rondon Ridge Lodge sits at 2,100m (7,100 feet) and some may notice the effects of altitude here, such as needing to walk at a slower pace or take regular breaks, particularly when walking uphill.

Focus

This is primarily a birdwatching tour, with some cultural interest and an effort with regard to mammals, reptiles and frogs. Please note that although we expect to see a good cross-section of New Guinea's avifauna, including a number of special birds, birding in New Guinea is recognised as being some of the most difficult in the world and can be quite frustrating at times. There may be days when most birds seem to have disappeared, but such days should be more than compensated for by other spectacular occasions.

Climate

The lowlands, at Port Moresby, Lake Murray and Karawari, are hot and humid throughout the year, whereas weather in the hills and mountains can be quite pleasant, especially at Varirata National Park. However, it can be very wet anywhere, including Rondon Ridge, and cool at night at Rondon Ridge Lodge.

Entry requirements

UK passport holders will need a visa for PNG, which can be applied for on-line. You will need a supporting letter from the local team to submit with your application which we will provide for you. You should have at least six months travel left on your passport from the return date of travel.

From 1 October 2025 all travellers to PNG must complete and submit online a Digital Arrival Card on the PNGDAC website: https://pngdac.ica.gov.pg/sbs-dac-ui/#/home This is free of charge and should be submitted within the 72 hours before arrival.

Malaria prophylactics should be taken as this is a high-risk country. We advise you to visit your GP as far in advance as possible to discuss your travel plans to PNG.

Accommodation and food

All food and accommodation is included in the price of the tour, from the evening meal on day 3 until breakfast on day 15. Breakfasts and dinners are usually at the accomodation, while lunches

may be taken in the field. We use a combination of a hotel at Port Moresby and then comfortable lodges for the rest of this tour.

Additional Expenses

All food and accommodation are included in the tour price as above, except for drinks, laundry, souvenirs, additional meals in Port Moresby, excess baggage and other such incidentals. Unscheduled excursions may require payment to local landowners, typically 25 Kina (US$6) per person. Outside of Port Moresby only beer, wine and soft drinks are available. As a rough idea, a beer is likely to cost 15 – 25 Kina (US$4 – 6) and a bottle of Australian wine around 150 – 250 Kina (US$40 – 60).

Your visa, which should be applied for prior to departure, currently costs US$50 (as of July 2026).

Your safety & security

Security is rarely a problem on any of our trips; the vast majority of the people we come into contact with are scrupulously honest. However, it is only sensible to exercise caution when on holiday - do not take expensive jewellery or watches with you; do not flash your money around, and keep your money and passport somewhere safe, using the room safe, if available. Do not leave anything of value lying around where it can easily be picked up - i.e. look after your belongings!

Risks to your safety and security are an unavoidable aspect of all travel and the best current advice on such risks is provided for you by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In order to assess and protect against any risks in your chosen destination, it is essential that you refer to the Foreign Office website – https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/papua-new-guinea or telephone 0870 6060290 prior to travel.

Flights

International flights are usually with Singapore Airlines and sometimes Cathay Pacific, then Air Niugini for flights on to Port Moresby. Singapore Airlines may have some options for some regional connections.

Within the tour there are internal flights with a local carrier and some charter flights between lodges. There is a baggage allowance on Air Niugini international flights of 30kg however Air Niugini domestic flights typically have a baggage allowance of 16kg. On charter flights you must restrict your baggage to 10kg and one small carry on bag or camera bag. Large hard or soft-sided suitcases are not permitted on these flights. Excess baggage can be stored at Port Moresby or Mount Hagen if needed.

Transport

We will use a mixture of vehicles on this tour, some smaller minibuses, possibly some 4x4 vehicles and small motorised boats.

Vehicles will have sufficient window seats for the whole group to have one, although we would ask that you rotate round the vehicle to give everyone the opportunity to have a seat towards the front of the vehicle. A good amount of our time will be spent away from the vehicles on walks.

Group Size

The maximum group size will be 8 and this tour will be accompanied by local guides. For groups of four or more, a Naturetrek leader will also travel with the group.

Extensions

There are no set extensions for this tour, but you can choose to extend your stay in Papua New Guinea, including Walindi Plantation Resort on New Britain (https://walindiresort.com/) or the western part of PNG around either the Fly River or Bensbach. Other options include a stopover in Singapore or going on to Australia. Please contact the Naturetrek office if you would like to discuss extending your trip.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.

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