



Kirsty Swinnerton.

Searching for the Red-throated Lorikeet

(Charmosyna amabilis)

By KIRSTY SWINNERTON

Aleksandra Maljkovic (assistant) and I have been in Fiji now for nearly two months, and we have just returned from the field. We landed on the main island, Viti Levu, and made a base in the capital city of Suva. We are working with the National Trust of Fiji and our first two weeks were spent meeting people and organising everything necessary for our field surveys of the Red-throated Lorikeet. We collected our two off-road dirt bikes, which we managed to buy second-hand though they are virtually new, and headed off into the field on 23rd November. Our first destination was the Central Highlands of Viti Levu at a site called Monasavu, where we spent the next month. The trip up was a little hair-raising on the bikes. It took five hours and 100 kms of hard driving on a dirt road that at times seemed much like a flower bed the soil was so thick, and towards the end it was like driving up the side of a slate quarry.

The Central Highlands have some of the best native forest left in Fiji and is the only area where the Red-throated Lorikeet has been seen with any regularity. Regularity is a bit of a misnomer however, the last reliable sighting was in 1993. But it seemed like a good place to start. The area we surveyed ranges from 700 m to 1,300 m and is the wettest part of the island, receiving up to 9,000 mm of rain a year. In the centre is a hydro-electric power station that supplies 60% of Viti Levu's electricity. There is a small team of people living there and we had been given the use of the managers flat. This was so well equipped (hot showers, washing machine, tumble drier, microwave!) that we really didn't feel like it was

fieldwork. During the month's survey we also camped in areas farther afield to cover more ground. To carry out our survey, we have been doing canopy watches from vantage points overlooking the forest. As the lorikeets are canopy feeders and fast flyers, we felt that this was the most likely way to see birds. As usual in the tropics, we lost several days to heavy rain and thick, low cloud where the visibility dropped to about 10 m. We have seen most of Fiji's endemic bird species, including lots of Collared Lories, Masked Shining Parrots and even the Fiji Peregrine Falcon, which is currently estimated at about 50 pairs. But we are sorry to say that we have not seen a single Red-throated Lorikeet, nor heard any

definite calls from them. This has been very disappointing, but we still have many other sites to survey yet so only time will tell.

In addition to looking for the lorikeet, we have been investigating why it might be so rare. Fiji has the familiar gamut of introduced species: rats, lesser Indian mongoose, feral cats, feral pigs, mynah birds (two species here), red-vented bulbuls and even feral goats and deer on some islands. Rats have been suggested as a likely cause of the lorikeet's rarity, particularly the black rat which is a tree-dweller. However, most Pacific islands have an aboriginal rat, the Polynesian rat, which has been in Fiji for thousands of years. It is a little difficult to see how rats could affect the native birds, when they have already resisted the effects of rat predation for so long. However, we have been catching rats in the native forest to find out what species are living there, and to compare rat densities in different forest types. We have found that mongooses and feral cats abound, even in the high altitude native forest. The rarity of the lorikeet may not be due to one specific thing, but a suite of factors including introduced species and a gradual loss and degradation of

native forest by fire and clearance for farming and plantation trees.

We are lucky to be working with Alifereti (Fijian for Alfred) Naikatini, who works for the University of the South Pacific in Suva, and who has been guiding us through the Fijian traditional customs. Most of the land in Fiji is owned by the villages and, before being able to access any land, we carry out a 'sevusevu' with the village Chief and Elders in order to ask permission. This is followed by a kava drinking session shared with the villagers. Kava is the root of a pepper tree, which is made into a narcotic drink. It is currently being sold in the West as a herbal remedy for stress relief and insomnia! These ceremonies can go on for several hours but are a good way of finding out information about the birds.

Now that the Christmas and New Year holidays are over, we are heading off once again into the field. For the next two weeks we are surveying another area in Viti Levu and then heading off for Fiji's third largest island, Taveuni. Taveuni has a reputation as being Fiji's 'Garden Island' and I hope that in my next letter, we will have some more positive news.



Red-throated Lorikeet in the wild.

Photo: Dr William Beckon



National Trust for Fiji Team at HQ in Suva.

Photo: K. Swinnerton