



The Vanua Levu Silktail – Future in the Balance

AN URGENT RESCUE PACKAGE has been put together by Forest and Bird for one of the South Pacific's rarest birds in an attempt to stop yet another extinction.

Only an estimated 50 pair of Fiji's Vanua Levu silktail, an ancient member of the small monarchine flycatcher family, were thought to still exist when a survey team arrived in Fiji last December.

Discovered by science in 1873, *Lamprolia victoriae* is regarded as an isolated relic of birdlife in a category similar to the wrens, wattlebirds and thrushes of New Zealand. As yet little studied, scientists have already concluded that its loss would be a tragedy of international significance. The bird is restricted to wet tropical rainforests on Vanua Levu Island's Tunuloa Peninsula. When the team began work they knew that silktail existed only in the remnant unlogged forests – and for the past 10 years the loggers had been moving in.

The team's mission was to find out how close to extinction the flycatcher was and what could be done to save it. Survey team leader and DoC conservation officer Rick Thorpe said the bird's greatest threat was habitat destruction as the 60 percent Australian-owned Fiji Forests Industry (FFI) continues to log out native hardwoods like kauri, yaka and kaudamu for veneer processing and export.

"All the time we were surveying the peninsula the logging company was right behind us working its way through the hardwoods," says Rick.

The birds were last surveyed in 1980; since then the area had been extensively cut. The team expected to find few birds left. In this, at least, they were pleasantly surprised. During the search the team found more than 235 silktail, mostly in pairs and mostly in the company of other feeding bush birds.

Survey party members Peter Montgomery, Nigel Miller, Mika Savukaikadavu and Rick Thorpe started out trying to find as many birds as they could, but it soon became obvious that there were many more birds than expected.

"After the first week we changed the survey to a density and distribution estimate. We found out how far down the peninsula the birds were found and what forest types they preferred."

The densest populations were always found in the remnant virgin forests – those that the loggers had not yet reached. Here bird numbers were still large enough to maintain a viable population – if the logging could be stopped.

The survey was undertaken at the invitation of Fiji's Native Lands Trust Board, which wanted advice on the best way to protect what silktail remained. The survey team's recommendation, supported by Forest and Bird, was the creation of a 500 ha special purpose fauna reserve for the silktail's long-term protection.

This proposal has since been put to the



The Vanua Levu silktail: is time on its side? Photo: Michael Dennison

trust board. Meanwhile forest company FFI has agreed to a logging moratorium while it is considered.

"We proposed a reserve area which contains the largest area of virgin forest left on the peninsula because the birds have a preference for untouched tropical rainforest," says Rick. "Some parts of the proposed reserve have been selectively logged, but the silktail can still use these areas provided they've not been too badly damaged."

"It was difficult to estimate the habitat needs of this almost unknown bird. We didn't know what its seasonal needs were or its mortality and recruitment rates. Because of this we designed the reserve based on our knowledge of small insectivorous birds, something we believe will be large enough for all their cyclical needs."

"Something else we don't yet know is their relationship with other birds and animals. We discovered that the silktail spent a lot of their time grouped with other insectivorous birds: we often found them by following other birds' calls. Normally we found silktail nearby, feeding and moving through the foliage."

"We still don't know how big a tract of forest these other birds need but silktail appear to have a home range. They're not territorial. We saw a number of silktail together, up to five in one place, or crossing through each other's range," Rick says.

In recommending the reserve the team also had to consider the competitive pressures conservation faced in developing countries.

"Conservation can be very difficult in a third world country because there has to be an allowance for balanced use. It's difficult when there's great pressure on the land. We realised its importance for hunting and food gathering for the mataqali (local people). Our proposal incorporates the needs of the people and the land."

"Very little of the proposed reserve would be suitable for cultivation, the mataqali would retain hunting access but logging could not be permitted."

The survey team spent seven weeks walking through the forests and studying the silktail's habits. During that time they also

took the opportunity to show the locals a "passive alternative" to the one-off logging option.

"We tried to show them that simply guiding tourists through their forests could make them far more money than logging. We paid our guide \$20 a day to impress them with the fact that there's money in tourism."

"Once, in the deep forest when we were really thirsty, he cut down a vine and poured out about a cup and a half of pure water for us to drink. When we were out surveying, if we stopped for a break, our guide climbed a tree and cut us some green drinking coconuts and pineapples. As we walked along he caught enough freshwater prawns for our dinner."

"They're so totally in tune with their forests, and they take their skills for granted."

Close to the resort area of Savu Savu, a protected forest area on Vanua Levu has the potential to provide international visitors with a back-to-nature experience they could find nowhere else in the world, Rick says.

Few logging operations are yet active in the proposed reserve area. However, their impact means not only the destruction of precious and diminishing flycatcher habitat. Logging access roads cut deep into the rainforest also allow access to predators like rats and mongooses.

Normally these animals confine their hunting to the forest margins, but new forest roads allow them into areas normally free of such predators.

"In the logged forests significant numbers of cats and mongooses were seen by the survey team. This compares with virgin forest where no predators, or sign of them, was seen. The exception to this was where mongooses were seen to penetrate the virgin forest up to 200 metres from a logging road," said Rick.

Despite these threats and impacts, the survey's results show that enough silktail still survive to maintain a viable population – but only if protective action is taken now. 🦋

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