

# Threatened Birds of Asia:

## The BirdLife International Red Data Book

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## DUSKY FRIARBIRD

### *Philemon fuscicapillus*

Critical  —  
Endangered  —  
Vulnerable  C1

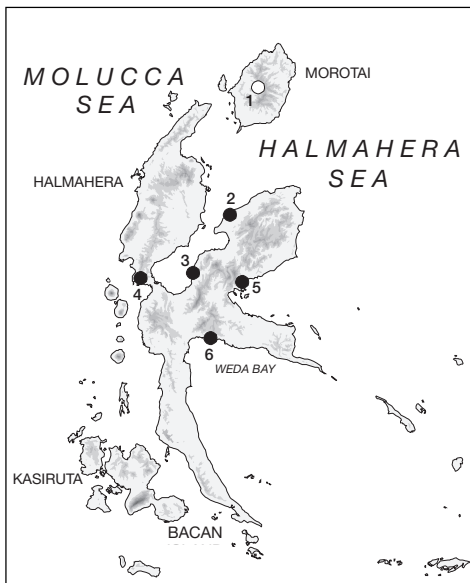


*On account of the very few confirmed recent reports of this species, it can be surmised that its population is small. Moreover, the decline inferred from continued habitat loss and degradation in its range permits its classification as Vulnerable. However, detection is hampered by the presence of an almost identical mimetic species.*

**DISTRIBUTION** The Dusky Friarbird has been listed as endemic to the North Moluccan islands of Morotai, Halmahera and Bacan, Indonesia (Salvadori 1880–1882, van Bemmell 1948, Coates and Bishop 1997). Whether this is in fact the case appears by no means certain. No record can be traced from Bacan (the species was not found there in October–November 1991: Lambert 1991), and no *specimen* record can be traced from Halmahera (thus see the last sentence under Population); it is therefore conceivable that the species is endemic to Morotai, although records are admitted here from Halmahera.

■ **INDONESIA** *Morotai* Despite the number of specimens (see Population) from this fairly large island, the only specific locality recorded is the “BPM Camp” (untraced), April–May 1950 (four specimens in ZMA). Other dated specimens are from 1861–1862 and 1898 (specimens in AMNH, MCZ, RMNH, USNM). The species was evidently widespread in 1945 (Lendon 1946).

*Halmahera* Records have been very few (see Population), but include: **Hilaitetor**, below 120 m, September 1994 (Fuller undated); **Sungai Tolawi**, below 120 m, August 1994 (Fuller undated); **Kali Batu Putih**, reported singly throughout 1990s (many observers *in litt.* 1999);



**The distribution of Dusky Friarbird *Philemon fuscicapillus*:**

(1) Morotai island; (2) Hilaitetor; (3) Sungai Tolawi; (4) Kali Batu Putih; (5) Buli; (6) Yonelu.

○ Historical (pre-1950) ● Recent (1980–present)

**Buli**, September 1996 (J. O. Gjershaug and N. Rov *in litt.* 1999); **Yonelu** by Danau Sagea, April 1999 (D. Agista *in litt.* 1999).

**POPULATION** This is an enigmatic species, reasonably well represented in museum collections yet now rarely reported by field ornithologists (Collar and Andrew 1988). It appears to be much rarer on Halmahera and Bacan (if it occurs on these islands at all) than it is on Morotai: of 27 museum specimens traced for this study, 26 are from Morotai (taken by at least four different collectors) and one has no data. The most recent four specimens are from as long ago as 1950, and rather bafflingly two are labelled “common” and two “not common” (ZMA label data). In 1945 it was “very common” on Morotai (Lendon 1946). During three weeks on Halmahera in 1992 none was observed, leading to the assumption that it must be “an extremely rare bird” there (Lambert 1994a). During several months of fieldwork on the island in the mid-1990s it was not certainly identified, owing to visual mimicry involving the Halmahera-endemic Dusky-brown Oriole *Oriolus phaeochromus* (MKP), and in 1994 it was only recorded three times (Fuller undated). It is described as uncommon, but the explanation of the paucity of records may be that it is largely overlooked in the canopy of tall trees (Coates and Bishop 1997). Another explanation is that it is not present on Halmahera at all (i.e. all sight records in Distribution would have been of the Dusky-brown Oriole), although this immediately raises the question of how and why the oriole might have evolved its friarbird mimicry (MKP; see also Remarks 1).

**ECOLOGY Habitat** On Morotai in 1945 the species was found very commonly in coconut plantations, usually in small parties, and regarded as “a very stupid clumsy bird” (Lendon 1946); five years later it was found in “secondary vegetation (bush)” and a coconut plantation (ZMA label data). On Halmahera in 1994 it was recorded twice in primary forest and once in logged forest, always below 120 m (Fuller undated), although Coates and Bishop (1997) gave an elevational limit of 450 m (the basis of which is now judged mistaken: K. D. Bishop *in litt.* 2000), and Poulsen *et al.* (1999) tabulated it as reaching 600 m.

**Food** There is no information.

**Breeding** A male on Morotai had fairly enlarged gonads in April, and two juveniles were collected in May (specimens in ZMA).

**THREATS** The Dusky Friarbird is one of (now) eight threatened members of the suite of 26 bird species that are entirely restricted to the “Northern Maluku Endemic Bird Area”, threats and conservation measures in which are profiled by Sujatnika *et al.* (1995) and Stattersfield *et al.* (1998). Most forest in the North Moluccas is still intact; at the start of the 1990s it was reported that 88.5% of the total area of Morotai, Halmahera and Bacan remained forested (Lambert 1993a,b). However, these forests are under increasing pressure (for Halmahera see equivalent section under Sombre Kingfisher *Todiramphus funebris*). The one protected area in North Maluku, on Bacan, is at risk (see Measures Taken).

**MEASURES TAKEN** On Bacan, Gunung Sibela Strict Nature Reserve embraces just over 100 km<sup>2</sup> of lowland forest, but is under pressure from agricultural encroachment and goldmining interests (see equivalent section under White Cockatoo *Cacatua alba*).

**MEASURES PROPOSED** Because Morotai has been perceived as holding no species that could not be found on Halmahera, because it is less accessible, and because Halmahera holds species not known to occur on Morotai, there has been very considerable ornithological neglect of Morotai which now requires rectification: a major survey is needed of the island, along with several other islands such as Tidore, Kasiruta and Bacan, in order to determine the status of the bird species present on them which also form elements in the Northern

Maluku Endemic Bird Area (see Stattersfield *et al.* 1998). However, it is also important to clarify, perhaps through mist-netting and tape-recordings, whether the species occurs on Halmahera and indeed Bacan. There is a need to identify some key sites where this species occurs and which should be targeted for long-term conservation action.

There is a detailed recommendation for a national park embracing a total of 2,130 km<sup>2</sup> on Halmahera (see equivalent section under White Cockatoo).

**REMARKS** (1) Wallace (1890) wrote of Morotai that “About fifty-six species of land-birds are known to inhabit this island, and of these a kingfisher (*Tanysiptera doris*), a honeysucker (*Tropidorhynchus fuscicapillus*), and a large crow-like starling (*Lycocorax morotensis*), are quite distinct from allied species found in Gilolo”, which implies that he was certain a friarbird (“*Tropidorhynchus*”) was present on Halmahera (“Gilolo”).