Threatened Birds of Asia:
The BirdLife International Red Data Book

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SULU WOODPECKER

Picoides ramsayi

Critical □ —
Endangered □ —
Vulnerable ■ A1c; A2c; B1+2a,b,c,d,e; C1; C2a

This woodpecker qualifies as Vulnerable because it has a very small range and population, both of which are undergoing a rapid decline and severe fragmentation as a result of habitat loss.

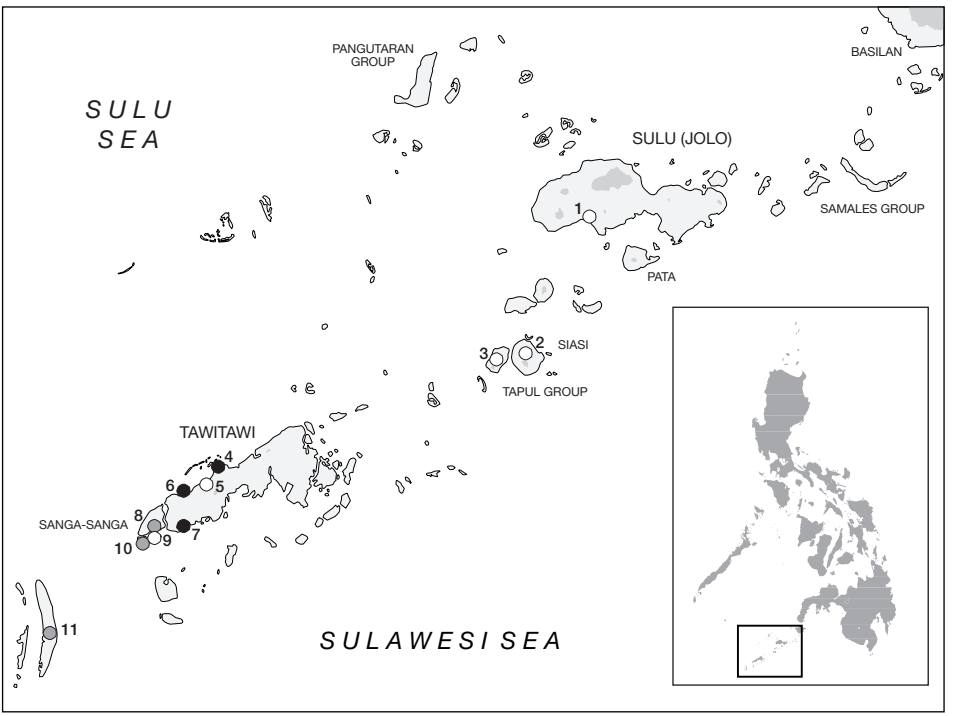
DISTRIBUTION The Sulu Woodpecker (see Remarks 1) is confined to the Sulu archipelago, Philippines. Records are from:

■ ***PHILIPPINES*** *Jolo* **Maimbung**, May 1883 (male in AMNH), with an unspecified locality in April–May 1883 (three specimens in AMNH, BMNH; also Guillemard 1885a);

Siasi **Siasi** (see Remarks 2), October 1906 (two specimens in USNM; also Mearns 1909a), with an unspecified locality, February 1895 (male in BMNH);

Lapac February 1892 (Voous 1947);

Tawitawi **Suwang Batang**, recently (D. Allen *in litt*. 1998); **Tataan**, October 1891 (specimen in USNM); **Magsagaw**, August 1994 (T. M. Brooks *in litt*. 1998); **Batu-batu**, December 1971 (three males in DMNH) and recently (D. Allen *in litt*. 1998);



The distribution of Sulu Woodpecker *Picoides ramsayi*: (1) Maimbung; (2) Siasi; (3) Lapac; (4) Suwang Batang; (5) Tataan; (6) Magsagaw; (7) Batu-batu; (8) Sanga-sanga; (9) Papahag; (10) Bongao; (11) Sibutu.
○ Historical (pre-1950) ◍ Fairly recent (1950–1979) ● Recent (1980–present)

Sanga-sanga October to December 1971 (duPont and Rabor 1973a);
Papahag February 1908 (Mearns 1909a);
Bongao July 1893 (seven specimens in AMNH, BMNH), October 1971 (male in DMNH);
Sibutu October or November 1971 (duPont and Rabor 1973a).

POPULATION The statement that the Philippine Woodpecker *Picoides maculatus* (here including the Sulu Woodpecker) "is common, and the most abundant woodpecker, on all the main islands, including the Sulu archipelago" (Winkler *et al.* 1995) gives the impression that the species is common in the Sulus. This appears to have been true much earlier in the century, when Hachisuka (1931–1935) reported it "very abundant about dead trees in the open fields, both in Sulu and Tawi Tawi", but since then the only published account of its abundance remains that of duPont and Rabor (1973a), who in 1971 "met with [it] rarely", although they judged that "its rarity may be more apparent than real because of its small size and unobtrusive habits". However, recent observers in the Sulu archipelago have not found it at all common (D. Allen, T. M. Brooks *in litt.* 1998), possibly in part because its habitat has not yet been clearly determined (see below), but at least in part as a consequence of the steady clearance of forest being experienced throughout the archipelago.

ECOLOGY ***Habitat*** In 1971 the species was found "in the clearings, cultivated areas, and forest edges on the larger islands" (duPont and Rabor 1973a). It has been speculated that it avoids dense forest and may even prefer mangroves, although three recent records have been from "good forest", a clearing and mangroves (D. Allen, T. M. Brooks *in litt.* 1998).

Food Food is unrecorded, but foraging occurs on the trunks of trees (duPont and Rabor 1973a).

Breeding A specimen in BMNH taken in July, Bongao, is labelled "juvenile", although the evidence for this diagnosis is not obvious. Two birds taken together in October, Siasi, were assumed to be a mated pair (Mearns 1909a), but it is not known if occurrence in pairs is a year-round phenomenon or one tied to the breeding season.

Migration Nothing is known of seasonal movements in this species.

THREATS The only likely threat to this species is habitat loss, but as it is not clear what habitat it prefers it is not possible to explain exactly why it should be as rare as it appears to be. Observers in around 1987 and September 1991 considered that "extensive forest still exists" on Tawitawi (Krupa and Buck 1988, Lambert 1993c), but such forest (as seen from the air) appears actually to be young secondary growth (almost all trees are currently below 20 cm in diameter at breast height), and logging of the few remaining areas with large trees—almost entirely confined to rugged and mountainous areas—appears to be unsustainable and soon to be followed by uncontrolled settlement and full conversion to agriculture as the island develops and malaria is eradicated (D. Allen *in litt*. 1996, 1997). Moreover, Jolo is completely or almost completely deforested and there is no primary forest now left on Sanga-sanga, only some heavily degraded areas (G. C. L. Dutson *in litt*. 1996, D. Allen verbally 1997).

MEASURES TAKEN There have been no measures known to be of direct benefit to this species (although see Measures Taken under Sulu Hornbill *Anthracoceros montani*). Coastal areas of the Sulus and Tawitawi have been proposed for FPE funding (see Appendix).

MEASURES PROPOSED The species is known from two "key sites" (Sibutu/Tumindao islands and Tawitawi; see Appendix) and these deserve further survey and formal designation, at least in part, under the NIPAS process. An assessment of the numerical status and optimal habitat of this species is now urgently needed. Assuming that it will be found to occur in

wooded habitats, even if not in deep forest, most of the recommendations applying to other threatened birds reliant on forests in the Sulu and Tawitawi archipelagos (see Measures Proposed under Sulu Hornbill) are likely to be appropriate to this species.

REMARKS (1) This small woodpecker has in the past half-century been treated as a race of the Philippine Woodpecker *Picoides maculatus* (Short 1982, Dickinson *et al.* 1991, Winkler *et al.* 1995), which itself was once treated as part of a larger "pygmy woodpecker" species including Sulawesi Woodpecker *P. temminckii* (Delacour and Mayr 1946). Earlier, both Hachisuka (1931–1935) and Voous (1947) had treated it as a separate species, and indeed it is so distinctive as to be arguably closer to *P. temminckii* than it is to *P. maculatus* (this view is also expressed, with the comment that *ramsayi* is "the ancestor common to both", by White and Bruce 1986), and given the evident morphological proximity of Brown-capped *P. moluccensis*, Grey-capped *P. canicapillus* and Pygmy Woodpeckers *P. kizuki* to both *maculatus* (non-Sulu forms) and *ramsayi*, there is no compelling reason to combine the latter two as a single species. Sulu birds differ from other Philippine forms in: replacing all black or dark brown with a mid-brown; lacking virtually all white spotting on wings and coverts; lacking black or dark brown spotting or streaking on the undersides; showing an ill-defined yellow or yellowish-orange breast-band, plus (in the male) a far more strongly developed red area on the nape. The specific separation of *ramsayi* is all the more arguable for the geographically closest representative of *maculatus*—*fulvifasciatus* of Mindanao and Basilan—showing the strongest pied effect. The notion that these two forms are "bridged" by *maculatus*, with a throw-away description of *ramsayi* as "aberrant" (Salomonsen 1953), not only fails to deal with the suggestion of Voous (1947) that *ramsayi* represents an early invasion of the Philippines, but also misses the point that *maculatus* is not geographically interposed between the two forms it is supposed to bridge. It is worth noting that in the paper in which both *ramsayi* and *fulvifasciatus* were first established, the formal description of *ramsayi* compared it to *temminckii* rather than to *maculatus* (Hargitt 1881). (2) The characters used by Mearns (1909a) to separate Siasi birds as "*siasiensis*" are not apparent on BMNH 95.11.19.50, and this subspecies (listed in Dickinson *et al.* 1991) is accordingly not recognised here (a judgement that independently follows Delacour and Mayr 1946, Voous 1947, Short 1982).