

Threatened Birds of Asia:

The BirdLife International Red Data Book

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LESSER MASKED-OWL

Data Deficient

Tyto sororcula

DISTRIBUTION The Lesser Masked-owl has been reported to occur on three islands (or, more accurately, two islands and an island group) in the Indonesian archipelago, two adjacent in the southern Moluccas (race *cayelii*; see Remarks 1) and one being the main islands in the easternmost Nusa Tenggara (nominate *sororcula*). Very recent opinion is that the form on Seram may not belong with this species at all (see Remarks 2). Records are from:

■ **INDONESIA** *Buru* western part of Fogha or **Fogi mountains**, August–October 1898 (Stresemann 1914); **Wae Eno**, April 1921 (Siebers 1930); **Wakatin**, 1921 or 1922 (Siebers 1930); **Teluk Kayeli** (Kayeli Bay), October 1889 (Hartert 1900b; see Remarks 3);

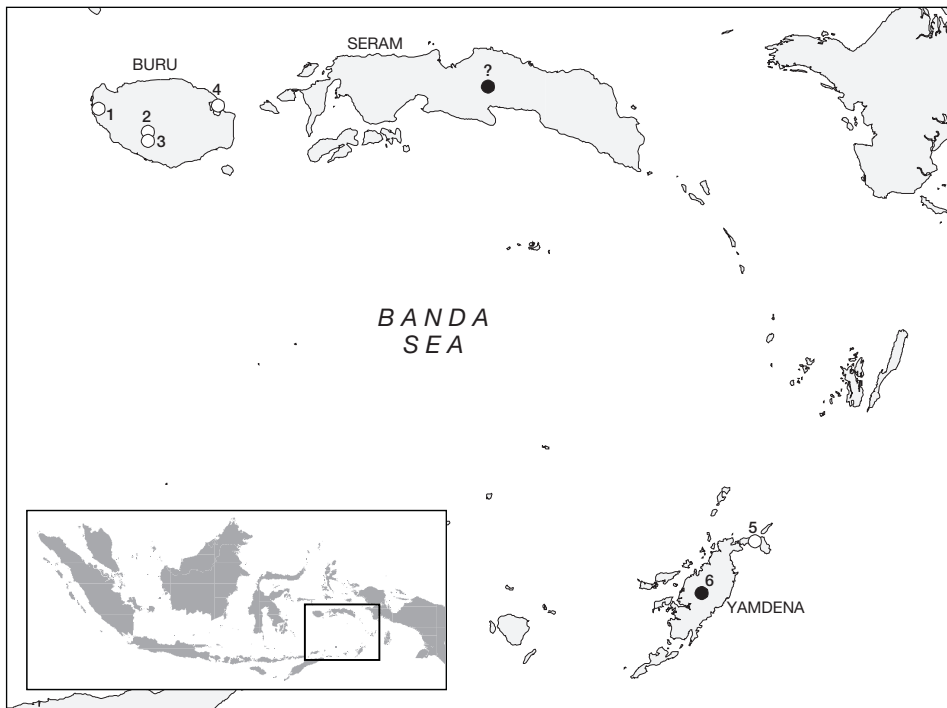
Seram Manusela National Park, 1980s (Coates and Bishop 1997, Bishop and Brickle 1998), possibly (see Remarks 2);

Larat (Tanimbar Islands) unspecified locality, September 1882 (Sclater 1883, Forbes 1885);

Yamdena 25 km north-west of Saumlaki on a new logging road, 25 m above sea-level, January 1996 (Bishop and Brickle 1998, K. D. Bishop *in litt.* 2000);

unspecified island in the Tanimbar group, April 1923 (Stresemann 1934).

POPULATION So little information is available on this species that the allocation of threat status is very problematic. L. J. Toxopeus used the word “rare” for it, but he noted that the



The distribution of Lesser Masked-owl *Tyto sororcula*: (1) Fogi mountains; (2) Wae Eno; (3) Wakatin; (4) Teluk Kayeli; (5) Larat; (6) Yamdena.

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

Wa'Katin area, where he saw a bird flying, was "unusually rich in night birds", and he also mentioned that the species is greatly feared as the "mother of evil spirits" and that limestone cliffs, where his birds were caught (see below), are found in great number in south and west Buru (Siebers 1930). These items of evidence suggest that the species may not be so rare on Buru.

ECOLOGY Habitat The two known sites for the Lesser Masked-owl on Buru "presumably would have been covered at one time with moist tropical lowland forest" (K. D. Bishop 1989; but see Remarks 3); it is possible therefore that the species may depend on lowland forest. However, L. J. Toxopeus was brought two living birds (one was subsequently lost) said to have been caught in holes in limestone cliffs (Siebers 1930). The bird seen on Yamdena in 1996 was spotlighted before dawn in the lower canopy of a 30 m tall vine- and epiphyte-covered tree within selectively logged semi-evergreen forest on level ground (Bishop and Brickle 1998).

Food There is no information, but the diet is probably similar to the species's congeners (König *et al.* 1999), i.e. the smaller mammals (whose distribution and abundance on Buru, if known, might give a clue to the uncertain elevational preferences of the species).

Breeding Nothing is known.

THREATS The Lesser Masked-owl is confined to the "Banda Sea Islands and Buru Endemic Bird Areas", threats and conservation measures in which are profiled by Sujatnika *et al.* (1995) and Stattersfield *et al.* (1998). The key issue is whether this species occurs in upland forest and/or disturbed lowland forest; if it does, it is probably secure in the long term, but if it does not it may be at some risk. Much of Buru's lowland forest, especially within 5 km of the coast, has been selectively logged, and areas of rich alluvial soil, such as at Sungai Kayeli, have been converted to agriculture (K. D. Bishop 1989); Wae Eno is also thought to be so altered as to be deserted by the species (del Hoyo *et al.* 1999). Forest on Larat (Tanimbar Islands) may have been seriously degraded as long ago as the start of the twentieth century (K. D. Bishop 1989), but this raises the question whether they were already degraded in 1882. Forest on Yamdena is still fairly extensive but is also highly accessible to logging, and cannot therefore be expected to persist without substantial official intervention (Collar and Andrew 1988, K. D. Bishop 1989).

MEASURES TAKEN None is known.

MEASURES PROPOSED On Buru, an area of 1,450 km² on Gunung Kepala Mada was originally proposed as a reserve, extending from the highest point on the island down the western side to sea-level, including the wettest and biologically richest forests (FAO 1981–1982); however, a revised and refined version of this proposal leaves out now-deforested areas and includes more land towards the east, embracing sites for each threatened species as identified in 1994 (Poulsen 1998).

In the Tanimbar Islands, an area of 600 km² on Yamdena is proposed as a reserve (Jepson 1996).

Surveys of the islands, using tape-recording, spotlighting and interviews with local people, are required to track down populations of this owl, followed by some careful evaluation of its critical ecological and conservation needs (as indicated under Threats).

REMARKS (1) While one recent study regarded the sample size as too small to permit the recognition of *cayelii* (König *et al.* 1999), another indicated clear differences and suggested that it may prove to have specific status (del Hoyo *et al.* 1999), which certainly seems possible given the curious distribution involved; del Hoyo *et al.* (1999) also suggested that the population on Seram may prove subspecifically distinct from that on Buru (see Remarks 2).

(2) The basis of this record is a photograph, identified with confidence by Coates and Bishop (1997) but treated with some caution by del Hoyo *et al.* (1999) and BirdLife International (2000). The photograph is in *Voice of Nature* no.51: 41 (October 1987), and new consideration suggests that the bird may in fact be closer to Taliabu Masked-owl *Tyto nigrobrunnea* than to *T. sororcula* (K. D. Bishop *in litt.* 2000). (3) This specimen became the type of “*Strix cayelii*”, with the type locality Kayeli (Hartert 1900b), not “Kaleji Bay” as in K. D. Bishop (1989) and del Hoyo *et al.* (1999), and not, incidentally, collected by W. Doherty (K. D. Bishop 1989) but by M. J. Dumas (Hartert 1900b). Two points of uncertainty arise, relating to the locality and habitat of Kayeli: (a) Kayeli is the main settlement where ships called, and it is therefore possible that the specimen from this site was not obtained locally; (b) a century ago the habitat at the bay included mangrove, swamp forest and monsoon forest (MKP).