

Ornithologists announce discovery of new bird species

March 14 2008



An artist's rendering of *Zosterops somadikartai*, or Togian white-eye. Credit: Agus Priyono

The announcement of the discovery of a new bird comes with a twist: It's a white-eye, but its eye isn't white. Still, what this new bird lacks in literal qualities it makes up for as one of the surprises that nature still has tucked away in little-explored corners of the world.

Ornithologists, including one from Michigan State University, describe for science a new species of bird from the Togian Islands of Indonesia – *Zosterops somadikartai*, or Togian white-eye, in the March edition of *The Wilson Journal of Ornithology*.

Its eye isn't ringed in a band of white feathers like its cousins who flock in other remote tropical islands of Indonesia. Still, it has many features in common with the black-crowned white-eye *Zosterops atrifrons* of Sulawesi, which is clearly its closest relative, said MSU's Pamela Rasmussen, an internationally known ornithologist specializing in Asian birds.

"What this discovery highlights is that in some parts of the world there are still virtually unexplored islands where few ornithologists have worked," Rasmussen said. "The world still holds avian surprises for us."

The Togian white-eye first was spotted by Mochaamad Indrawan, an Indonesian field biologist at the Depok Campus of the University of Indonesia, and Sunarto (some Indonesians use a single name), who is now working on a doctorate at Virginia Tech, 12 years ago during their first trip to the Togian Islands.

Those first sightings were fleeting, but Indrawan and Sunarto returned and made several more observations of these active little green birds, and obtained the type specimen upon which the species' description is now founded. The type specimen was then sent on loan to Rasmussen at the MSU Museum, so she could make detailed comparisons between it and related species at museums such as Britain's Natural History Museum, the American Museum in New York and the Smithsonian Institution.

The new bird is believed to be endangered. The white-eye has been seen only near the coasts of three small islands of the Togian Islands in central Sulawesi. Unlike most white-eye species, it is evidently quite uncommon even in its very limited range. Considering its limited numbers and distribution, it falls into the World Conservation Union category of endangered. This finding also establishes the Togian Islands as an endemic bird area.

“This finding shows that equal opportunities are beneficial for the development of science and in particular that international cooperation can boost capacities in addressing poorly known biology in the tropics,” Indrawan said. “This finding of the bird is only the beginning given the vast opportunities with Indonesian landscapes and seascapes of endemic flora and fauna.”

The species is named for Soekarja Somadikarta, Indonesia’s leading taxonomist and mentor to Indrawan. Somadikarta was recently appointed honorary president for International Ornithological Congress XXV.

Rasmussen noted that the Togian white-eye is distinctive not only in appearance, but its lilting song, which Indrawan recorded and Rasmussen committed to sonogram, sounds higher pitched and is less varied in pitch than its close relatives.

Source: Michigan State University

Citation: Ornithologists announce discovery of new bird species (2008, March 14) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2008-03-ornithologists-discovery-bird-species.html>

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