

Moluccan woodcock is 'not so endangered' after all

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John Mittermeier

(Phys.org) —A team of researchers has captured the first known photographs of the elusive Moluccan Woodcock (*Scolopax rochussenii*) and, in a rare case of good conservation news, suggest that it may be less threatened than previously believed.

The Moluccan Woodcock, which is restricted to two remote Indonesian islands, is classed as 'endangered' under International Union for the

Conservation of Nature criteria. Yet, researchers from Oxford University and Louisiana State University managed to record it on 51 occasions during a two-month stay on Obi Island in the Northern Moluccas of Indonesia. In their study published in the Asian journal, *Forktail*, they suggest that despite only 10 confirmed records of the bird before their expedition, they discovered the population is much healthier than previously thought. They calculate there could be as many as 9,500 Moluccan Woodcocks on Obi island, adding that they the species appears to be living mainly in the lowlands – a surprising turn of events given that up until now ornithologists had believed the birds preferred the mountainous area at the centre of the island.

Eden Cottee-Jones of the University of Oxford and John Mittermeier from Louisiana State University camped on the island between July to August 2012 with the aim of capturing the first photographs of the Moluccan Woodcock. They were presented with numerous challenges due to the island's rugged terrain and humidity, which affected the camera equipment. The birds also rarely came out of the undergrowth, appearing only briefly to perform a territorial display flight over the forest canopy for a few minutes at sunrise or dusk when the light was poor.

Using a 400mm lens with a flashlight taped under the lens hood, the researchers finally managed to take series of photographs of the bird at sunset on the final day of their 57-day expedition. The Moluccan Woodcock was at a distance of about 20 metres overhead when the researchers managed to take photographs while standing ankle-deep in the river. They were alerted to the bird's flight by its distinctive rattling call.

Researcher Eden Cottee-Jones said: 'Even when a Moluccan Woodcock would fly within camera range, the darkness and humidity in the air led to multiple technical problems with our equipment, and that was just on

the days when it wasn't raining. The other challenge was that the bird spends most of its day hidden in the undergrowth so there were few opportunities to photograph it in the open.'

John Mittermeier added: 'The Moluccan Woodcock only appears briefly at dawn and dusk to perform territorial display flights lasting around 21 minutes in the morning and 13 minutes at night. The size of their territories, along with the speed and height of their display flights, meant we only had two to three chances daily of taking a picture, and the best spot for a view of the bird was usually in the middle of a river!'

The Moluccan Woodcock was first collected by German naturalist Heinrich Bernstein, who obtained a single male specimen from Obi in 1862. Over the next 150 years, only seven additional individuals were recorded, six from Obi and a single individual from the neighbouring island, Bacan. After two birds were collected in 1982, the species disappeared for nearly 30 years. Ornithologists making three visits to Obi between 1989 and 2010 failed to record the bird. However, in 2010 the species was 'rediscovered' at two sites on Obi by a French ornithologist who recorded the bird's call.

On this latest expedition, the researchers surveyed 20 scattered sites around Obi and conducted interviews with local people, using modelling to calculate the total population of Moluccan Woodcocks on the island. The display behaviour and population size of this enigmatic bird are discussed in the study, which concludes that this 'lost species' is less endangered than expected and should be reassessed as 'vulnerable'.

The Moluccan Woodcock is a forest wader with a long black beak, a golden-brown plumage with black mottled markings and is recorded as living only on the remote islands of Obi and Bacan. A protected area has been proposed in the mountainous centre of Obi, but for the first time this research suggests that conservationists need to consider measures to

protect the population in the lowlands. Although the interviews with local villagers reveal that the birds are not hunted as food, the study says logging and nickel mining present a major threat to the birds' future habitat.

More information: Read the study: [orientalbirdclub.org/wp-content ... /12/Obi-Woodcock.pdf](https://orientalbirdclub.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Obi-Woodcock.pdf)

Provided by Oxford University

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