

Collecting Complexity

After writing about collecting Buzins, I realised that there were a number of other “obsessions to share and write about. In fact, possibly a dozen. I toyed with the idea of calling the series “Private Passions,” but then remembered that there is a radio programme of that name, so in the bin it went. Just, “Obsessions” came to mind, but was quickly rejected. Too much like an overpriced upmarket perfume. And then pondering a little more, I realised that what was at the core of these obsessions, the attraction, the hook, was their intricacies and complexity. And then there it was. Collecting Complexity. Obvious really. It is part of my rationale for collecting bird stamps.

There are a number that intrigue me. Whilst I collect a fairly wide range of bird stamps - simple as well as complex - and avoid only a handful of countries (I have a naughty list), there are some series I am constantly fascinated by and drawn to. These articles are about me explaining their interest and, hopefully, sharing their fascination.

Mad about Mugimaki's - The Philippine Bird Definitives

The Buzin's remain live and continue to grow each year. If you chose, I would suggest you could spend a lifetime collecting nothing else. But as well as these, I think that there are at least two other very complex series, as well as a number of other, daunting, “fiddly” ones which, whilst no longer current and growing, could nevertheless become an absorbing lifetime occupation. Who said collecting should be finite?

The one I want to talk about now is the Philippine bird definitives.

I think there should be a health warning if you want to collect these. They will drive you mad. I certainly had one dealer look at me as if I was bonkers when I said I collect these. Mainly small stamps, most just 22x25mm, often with a light blue squiggly security bar and with a rectangular or circular vignette background. One glance and you can't mistake them. They were designed and laid out by Corazon Loza and Robinson Cruza and they knew what they were doing. Each tiny stamp with exotic birds of South East Asia and with equally exotic names like Blue-crowned Racket-tail, Copper-throated Sunbird, Black-chinned Fruit Pigeon, Fire-breasted Flowerpecker or Mugimaki Flycatcher. And then, in very small print, those all important numbers, 2007, 2008A, 2009C or whatever. Maddeningly intricate and, let's be honest, confusing to distinguish.



Look closer, and you begin to realise that as well as being initially confusing and perhaps repetitive, they are also very beautiful and, dare I say, enchanting stamps. There is an underlying and beguiling logic to their complexity. I'll say something about the design and wonderful illustrations later, but let's start at the beginning and say something about how they work.

First of all, like the Buzins, they are definitives. They were intended as workhorse issues for the general population and not just pretty labels to sell to dealers for you and me to then buy. Philpost started issuing them at the end of October 2007 and with new issues and reprints in several formats they saw their last issue in February 2010; that's over 27 months. In that period, over 76 million stamps were printed and placed in circulation - an average of 2.8m stamps per month. I don't know if that is exceptional, but it still seems a lot.

The first to be issued was the Black-naped Oriole with the modest value of just one Peso (or Piso), currently worth about 14 pence. Modest perhaps, but because of its low value it acted as one of Philpost's primary stamps. Unsurprisingly, it also realised the highest print-run. Over 10.75 million of this design in various editions were produced; that's in excess of 14% of the entire series print-run. I have a thing about Orioles, so this one is a favourite.



The classic Philippine Eagle at 100p (roughly, £1.40) accompanied the first issue, and was destined to become the most issued species across the entire series. However, during 2007 a variety of other designs quickly followed in various formats. By the end of the year a further thirty stamps had been issued either in singles, or in se-tenant blocks of four or ten. In just two months, fourteen different values had been launched and a massive 40.6 million individual stamps had been printed - that's over 53% of the entire output. Again, I don't know how this compares with other initial issues, but for a country with a population of 93 million and for a series that was only going to exist for just two and a bit years, it seems impressive.

Philippine bird stamps prior to these definitives were, well, okay, but hardly exciting. So did Philpost realise that they were on to something here? Over half way through the total printings and things started to become even more interesting. And more complex.

At some point in the eighties Philippine postal services started to date annual issues. The first sets of definitives were dated "2007." Those that immediately followed in March 2008 were dated just, "2008." But then in September, Philpost started to reprint some of the originals and add a letter to the date. I call these - year and letter - "identifiers."

Let's take the first stamp, the Black-naped Oriole as an example. When issued in October 2007 its identifier was "2007." It was reprinted in early May 2008 and a further 1.5 million issued. Quite logically, these bore the identifier "2008." But there was a further reprint with another million in September of that year and these were given the identifier, "2008A." And then its last showing; a further 1.75 million were reprinted in mid-October and received the identifier "2008B." Simple?



And this pattern was repeated for a large number of the issues. So why did they do this? The official explanation reads opaquely, but according to Philpost it was decided that, “for internal control and accounting purposes,” reprints needed to be differentiated. They claimed that this practice is followed in Britain and the US, but I can’t think of any examples. At least not on the stamps themselves.

Essentially a device to ensure that when there was spoilage and re-printings at an agreed lower rate were made by Amstar, the Philippine’s official printer, they could be audited. They also felt that it made it, “easier for the stamp custodian to make dispatches using the “first in, first out” policy,” although I have no idea what that might have been.

And why several reprints of just one value? With 572 species occurring in the Philippines there was a wealth to choose from. I’ll reproduce the original statement:

“It seems that due to certain values being in demand, the only way to get these emergency issues printed is if the total value of each printing is for P500,000 and below, which will not require an approval from the Bids and Awards Committee. To go through the BAC, it will take longer than necessary; the demand from various post offices have to be met for the mailing public’s consumption.”

I think it can be summarised by saying that demand outstripped what was available, they kept running out and didn’t want new designs. But I may have got that wrong. There is even a heavy hint in one statement I read that said that quantities of stamps were put aside for dealers. It was all their fault.



For collectors though the outcome has been fascinating. Across over 27 months the definitives saw just 65 species - just over 11% of the birds found in the islands - nearly always at the original value, but across a total of 189 incarnations. That’s 378 stamps if you collect mint and used like me. Many were realised with different identifiers three or four times. Exactly the same stamp, but different identifier. Only the Philippine Eagle was realised in two different designs, but three different values. The species appeared seven times.

The end of the series came in early 2010 with 21 stamps issued, but this is the only year that does not have a specific identifier. They are reprints of 2009 issues and have identifiers for only that year. Below, there is a series of simple tables detailing the identifiers and numbers issued across the entire time span.

a) Years with Identifiers

2007	32
2008	63
2009	94
Total Issued:	189

b) Identifier Summary

"2007"	32
"2008"	52
"2008A"	9
"2008B"	2
"2009"	33
"2009A"	33
"2009B"	15
"2009C"	10
"2009D"	3
Total Issued:	189

Many stamps did not see reprints run through the life span of the series. There were issuing periods within the life span. The Black-naped Oriole for example saw issues from October 2007 to October 2008. There were then no further reprints. The Narcissus Flycatcher saw printings only from early March 2009 to January 2010. Owls put in an appearance right at the end. Phases with different species often overlapping. It is part of the beauty of their complexity.

Issue dates can be confusing. For some in the series Philpost had "First Day of Issue," which of course was its intended launch date, but they also had an, "Actual day of Issue." Brilliant! The latter nomenclature is probably more reliable. As far as I can discern, there were 38 actual issuing's but perhaps 47 first days of issue, a discrepancy of nine if you are counting. Some issues were lumped together and this is reflected in some of the first day covers that were also published. And yes, as well as the 378 to collect mentioned above, there is also at least 34 First Day Covers that I can identify, although there may be more. There will also be a vast combination of different issues on ordinary covers, if you are lucky enough to come across them. A few years study of then current Philippine postal rates and perhaps a PhD or two and you might then be able to compute them.



Believe me, I have spared the really nerdy detail concerning this series. If anyone is now interested or as obsessed as I have become by these stamps then I am happy to share.

I have never been to the Philippines, let alone to South East Asia, but these stamps by their very exoticness seem to transport you there. I have even dreamed about Mugimaki Flycatchers! Which reminds me that I promised to say something about the design.

All the illustrations come from one source - "A Guide to the Birds of the Philippines" by Kennedy, Gonzales, Dickinson, Miranda and Fisher. It was published by Oxford in 2000. The hardback edition is now out of print but my paperback is a 2016 reprint. It is a lovely informative book with beautiful colour plates and the illustrations are absolutely stupendous. There were a dozen illustrators, most of whom seem to be reflected across the stamps in the series. Jan LaGory for example was responsible for the Black-naped Oriole, and Ann Geise for the Mugimaki Flycatcher. I'm still working on a complete list of who illustrated which stamp.

If you really want to get into these stamps I bet you will find a favourite as well. They're gorgeous. But I warn you, they will drive you insane.

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