

A SPECIAL BOP (BIRD OF PARADISE)

by Carol Mitchell

'Nature seems to have taken every precaution that these, her choicest treasures, may not lose value by being easily obtained. First we find an open, harbourless, inhospitable coast, exposed to the full swell of the Pacific Ocean; next, a rugged and mountainous country, covered with dense forests, offering in its swamps and precipices and serrated ridges an almost impassable barrier to the central regions; and lastly, a race of the most savage and ruthless character.....In such a country and among such a people are found these wonderful productions of nature. In those trackless wilds do they display that exquisite beauty and that marvellous development of plumage, calculated to excite admiration and astonishment among the most civilised and most intellectual races of man.....'

These are the words of Alfred Russel Wallace in his 1862 'Narrative of Search after Birds of Paradise' (BOP) for the 'Proceedings of the Zoological Society of London'. The passage refers to the difficulties facing early visitors to Papua New Guinea (PNG). Whilst modern travel cocoons travellers, the difficulties faced by the first explorers must have seemed so daunting that it makes the mind boggle that they carried on regardless. But they did and are deserving of our gratitude for the wonders they revealed.

One of the first detailed explorations of New Guinea was by an Italian naturalist who, in 1875, became the first person to chart the Fly River in what is now Papua New Guinea. Luigi D'Albertis made three voyages in successive years and collected vast amounts of flora and fauna which are now housed in the Natural History Museum of Giacomo Doria in Genoa. However, this was an individual who, far from being our vision of a caring naturalist, then bullied, plundered, raped, pillaged and murdered his ways through the landscape and earned the universal criticism of his contemporaries, both explorers and colonial administrators.

Dynamite fishing and theft of ancestral remains, tools and weapons from the houses of the local people were some of his less heinous techniques. His full and repugnant exploits are condemned in the 1977 book by John Goode appropriately called 'The Rape of the Fly: Explorations in New Guinea'.

The Italian's single beneficial achievement was his discovery of a new Bird of Paradise which he named after his patron, the Marquis Francis Raggi of Genoa.

Paradisaea raggiana became the national bird of Papua New Guinea in 1971 and its image appears on the country's flag as a yellow silhouette with its wings open and its plumes trailing above the five stars of the Southern Cross constellation on a red background whilst on the national crest it is depicted displaying wings and plumes and perched on a *kudu* (drum) with a spear.



North Korea 2011

Whilst spectacular, this is not a big bird, just 13 inches long. Its overall colour is maroon-brown with a greyish-blue bill, an eye with a yellow iris and, continuing the greyish description, greyish-brown feet. The difference comes in the gender: the male has a yellow crown, dark emerald green throat and yellow collar above its black upper breast feathers. Then there is the tail and plumes – a pair of long black tail wires which are revealed below the great vivid scarlet fountain above his back during his display.

In true avian world fashion, the female has just the yellow head to distinguish her but is comparatively a little drab observer of the exhibition. The male ornamental flank plumes vary in colour from red to orange depending on subspecies. The nominate *Paradisaea raggiana raggiana* has the deepest red plumes while the subspecies *Paradisaea raggiana augustavictoriae* of the northeast region, also known as the Empress of Germany's bird of paradise, has apricot-orange plumes.

Their diet consists mainly of fruits and arthropods and the bird is a very important seed dispenser of the fruiting trees, especially of mahogany and nutmeg, two vital sources of income for the local economy. Polygamy rules the roost here. Just like capercaillie, the males congregate in leks.



These are some 30 – 100 metres in diameter, within which is a group of tall slender trees on which the males compete for prominent perches and, once found, these are defended forcefully from rivals as up to ten

males compete at any one time. Then the display begins with clapping wings and shaking head.

The nest is bowl-shaped, made of leaves, stems, ferns and any other plant material to beak and is lined with soft horsehair fronds and positioned 2 – 11 metres above ground in tree branches – the height is dictated by the likelihood of human disturbance. The clutch is normally two pinkish buff eggs and the incubation period is 18 days in the wild and 20 days in captivity. As in all polygamous birds of paradise, the female alone assumes all incubation duties and once hatched the offspring would expect to live for between 5 and 8 years.

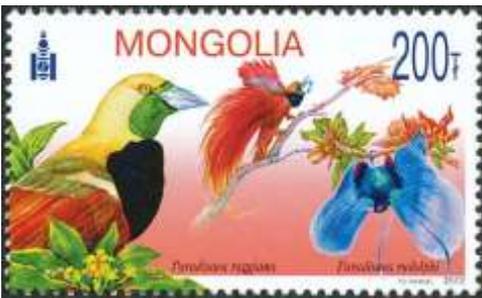


When the first birds of paradise arrived in Europe, they had been mounted without legs or wings, so it was believed initially that they were magical creatures that flew among the clouds (which is why, according to the legend, they did not need legs), they lived on cloud dew, obtained their colours from flying close to the sun and fell to earth when they died.

During the 19th century there was such a high demand for the feathers by European and American fashionable milliners that bird numbers plummeted dramatically and, according to one official source, at the start of the 20th century, 50,000 birds of paradise were killed and exported annually. Fortunately, sanity prevailed and, following an export ban in 1922, bird numbers began to recover. Although actual numbers have not been counted, the species is regarded now as widespread and common throughout its region with a stable population and is

evaluated as of Least Concern on the IUCN list. This status has enabled some feathers to be made available locally for tribal use. Whilst tradition allows replacements, most current communities prefer to continue to use those handed down from generation to generation and which have been kept, guarded carefully, in bamboo tubes. The main exponents utilising Raggiana feathers are the hunter-gatherer Huli wigmen of PNG's Tari Highlands who are noted for a bird dance in which they mimic the birds' movements.

The most outstanding place to see the Raggiana in Papua New Guinea is the Baiyer Wildlife Sanctuary which is north of Mount Hagen, the capital city of the Western Highlands Province.



Mongolia 2012

The first stamps to feature the Raggiana BOP were issued in 1931 and 1932 by New Guinea and in were in four sets between S.G. Nos 150-203 with two sets of Officials O31-O54. The depiction is monochromatic and far from explicit – it could be any BOP – but the current catalogue total value of those six sets is £2000.

The bird also appears on a Papua stamp of 1932 with an overprint for KGV Jubilee in 1935.



New Guinea - S.G. 150 and 151



Papua S.G. 133

Once Papua New Guinea started issuing stamps of the variety in 1963, colours began to do our feathered friend more justice but, with such a plethora of BOPs to choose from, our one has to take its turn with just a few to show its magnificence.



S.G. 42



S.G. 175

S.G. 452

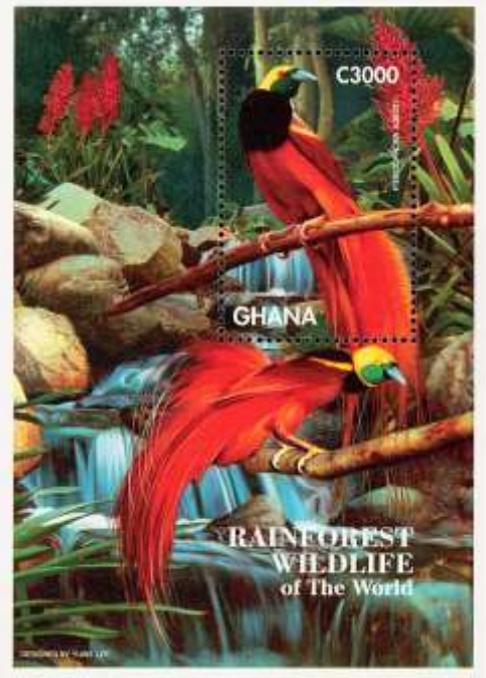


S.G. 879

Australia has issued one in 1984, S.G. 904,



with the Bird of Paradise being visible on New Guinea stamps, and Ghana, a country not to be left where spectacular colour is concerned, has a MS from 1996 - S.G. MS2319.



The indigenous name for the bird in Tok Pisin is *kumul*. First played in Papua New Guinea in the late 1940s and introduced there by Australian soldiers, the national team is nicknamed the Kumuls and its logo features the bird. Whilst the game is played with the right shaped ball, unfortunately it is the wrong code, Rugby League, not Union. But, as the bird is so beautiful, small details (!) can be forgiven!!

