

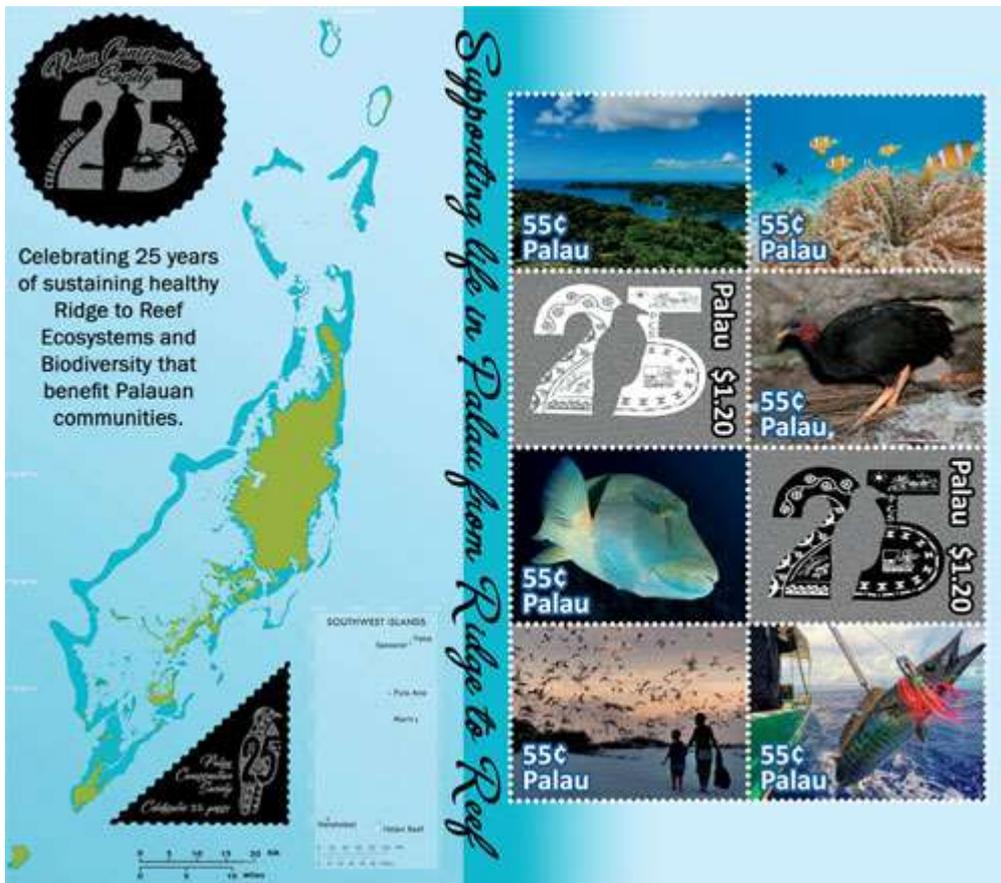
BIRD STAMPS OF PALAU

Where is Palau?

Palau is a group of coral and volcanic islands that form an archipelago that is located in the Pacific Ocean. A barrier reef encircles a major part of the archipelago. The nearest neighbours to Palau are the Philippines to the West and the island of New Guinea to the South. The principal inhabited islands are Babelthup (or Babeldoab), Koror, Malakal, Arakabesan, Peleliu, Belilou and Angaur.

Palau has an estimated population of 18,000 (2019) and uses the US dollar as its currency. The Republic of Palau came into existence as a nation state on 1 October 1994. The Constitution of Palau is based on a bi-cameral legislative body, known as “The Olbiil Era Kelulau” made up of a House of Delegates and a Senate. The Senate has authority to provide advice to the President; and consent to Presidential appointments. The Executive is represented by the President, Vice President, the Ministries and the Council of Chiefs, a body that represents one traditional tribal chief from each of Palau’s island state.

The geography of Palau – the barrier reef and archipelago – are nicely illustrated on this souvenir sheet issued on 14 June 2019, to commemorate the 25th Anniversary of the Palau Conservation Society.



Endangered Birds

The Souvenir Sheet features one bird on a 55c stamp: the endangered “Bekai” or Palau Megapode (*Megapodius laperouse senex*). This is one of the species that the Palau Conservation Society is seeking to protect. According to the Birdlife Data zone, the Palau Megapode (or Micronesian Scrubfowl) is in decline, owing to a multiplicity of threats which include:

- Disturbance to nesting sites because of increased tourist activity on the beaches;
- Illegal collection of eggs from nesting mounds;
- Periodic (albeit infrequent) hunting of the birds;
- Predation by rats, feral cats, dogs and pigs; and
- Predation by the accidentally introduced brown tree snake (*Boiga irregularis*).

Against that backdrop, the conservation effort has focused on protecting some of the birds in a Wildlife Reserve. The Conservation Society has other projects designed to address each of the identified threats listed above. Overall, a major effort on multiple fronts.

The Palau Megapode has appeared on two previous occasions on Palau stamps, in 1989 and in 2007. The 1989 stamp is shown below, as part of a set of four stamps featuring endangered species:



The three other endangered birds featured here include:

- 45c the Palau Nicobar Pigeon (*Caloenas nicobarica*)
- 45c the Palau Ground Dove (*Pampusana canifrons*) (*Alopecoenas canifrons*)
- 45c the Palau Owl (*Pyrroglaux podargina*)

The **Nicobar Pigeon** (locally known as the Laib) is one of the Palau Conservation Society’s priority species and has “Near Threatened” status. As well as native to Palau, it is also a resident of the Philippines, Papua New Guinea and Indonesia and other islands in Oceania. This range is reflected in the stamp issues, with around 30 stamps from Palau, the Solomon Islands, the Philippines, Micronesia and one from the United Nations, as part of the enduring “Endangered Species” series.

According to the Birdlife Data zone, the Nicobar Pigeon is threatened by the inevitable habitat loss (clearance of land for plantations), predation by rats and cats; and trapping by humans for food and the pet trade.

The **Palau Ground Dove** is a native to Palau and is endangered owing to the very small population size (250-999 birds) and the usual combination of threats: predation by rats and cats and habitat loss, as well as possible threat from the introduced brown tree snake. The Ground Dove is apparently a secretive bird and difficult to locate, hence the uncertainty over the population numbers.

The Ground Dove has featured previously on five other stamps (one from the Marshall Islands) with two appearances on Palau's Christmas stamps in 1989 and 1990.

The **Palau Owl** is classified as in the "Least Concern" category, so it is not obvious why it was included in this four-stamp set of endangered birds. The Palau Conservation Society doesn't list it as one of their priority species; and information from Birdlife indicates that the population of Palau Owls is thought to be stable.

The Palau Owl has appeared on four previous issues, including one from 2000, which formed part of a six-value stamp sheet on "Recovering and New Species". The marginal text on the 33c Owl stamp indicates that the Owl was endangered in 1970 and recovered in 1985. At least this explains why the Palau Owl was included in the Endangered Birds set, just four years after the recovery had started.

Birds on Definitives

I was attracted to these two stamps issued on 21 February 2006, as they are described as definitives, so there is some hope that they were used for postal purposes; and not simply targeted at collectors.



The two stamps feature the Black Oystercatcher (*Haematopus bachmani*) and the Great Blue Heron (*Ardea Herodias*). I have not been able to establish if either of the birds have ever visited Palau: it would seem unlikely (improbable) from the sources I have seen. However, when doing such research, it is easy to forget that we are dealing here with the vagaries of the natural world; and not pre-determined airline flight schedules (not that these also incorporate uncertainty, the more so in present times). So, it may well be that some birds do decide to carry out their own random trips that take them to new territories, in defiance of the listings of native and migratory birds that we humans dare to draw up.

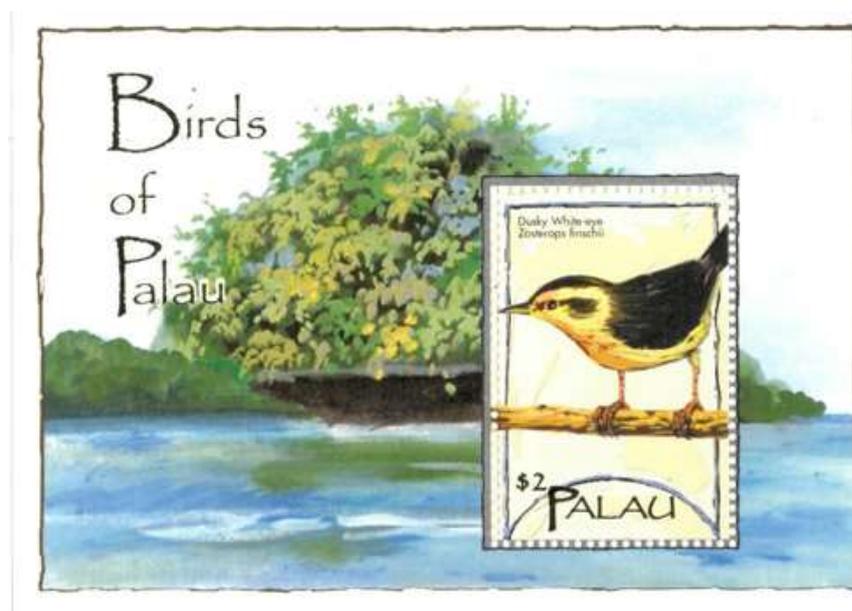
BIRD STAMP SOCIETY – FLIGHT MAGAZINE

The Black Oystercatcher is not common on stamps issues and is confined to just two stamps: one from Romania (in 1992) as well as the Palau stamp. Let's hope that it did travel some distance as part of ordinary mail.

The Greta Blue Heron is more generally found in the Americas, as is reflected in the stamp issues, with over 40 stamps issued by Canada, Jamaica, Cuba, Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados and Grenada Grenadines, to name but a few.

Native birds

Fortunately, the IGPC does devote a significant number of its issues to birds that can be closely associated with Palau, as is the case with this \$2 souvenir sheet featuring the **Dusky White-eye** (*Zosterops finschii*), issued on 13 October 2004.



The Dusky White-eye is classified as “Least Concern” and is presumed to have a stable population. It has also appeared on several other Palau stamp issues, in 1986, 2007 and 2016. The 2016 \$1.50 stamp appeared as part of a set of four in a sheet entitled “Rare Birds of Palau”, as illustrated below:



As well as the Dusky White-eye (top left-hand image) the sheet also includes:

- \$1.50 the **Palau Flycatcher** (*Myiagra erythrops*);
- \$1.50 the **Palau Fantail** (*Rhipidura lepida*); and
- \$1.50 the **Giant White-eye** (*Megazosterops palauensis*).

In the background, above the Dusky White-eye, is a photo of the **Palau Fruit-dove** (*Ptilinopus pelewensis*). According to the IGPC website, this souvenir sheet is available both in perforated and imperforate formats, the latter at a premium price, perhaps reflecting the rarity of this version of the rare birds of Palau.

The Palau Flycatcher, Fantail and Fruit-dove are all classed as being of “Least Concern” in terms of their vulnerability and are described as common within the islands that make up the Palau archipelago. I guess that the rarity is in their exclusivity to Palau, which is mirrored in the previous issues that you can find of these birds: the majority of earlier stamps are from Palau or neighbouring Micronesia.

The Giant White-eye is a “Near Threatened” bird, because of habitat loss. The bird is present on only two of the islands that make up Palau and there is concern that if the brown tree-snake was ever to reach those shores, then the Giant White-eye could be rapidly wiped out.

What has happened on Guam provides an example of what could occur in Palau if the brown tree-snake was ever to spread. This snake was originally native to Australia, Papua New Guinea and Indonesia, but has spread beyond these territories. The US Navy accidentally introduced the brown tree snake to Guam during construction projects there in the 1950s. The snakes managed to get on board aircraft or ships, often via the cargoes and then slip away when they arrived at their destination. Unfortunately, the brown tree snakes have had a devastating effect on local birds on Guam: of 18 species, seven are now extinct; and two survive only in captivity. In some areas of that territory, there are up to 13,000 brown tree-snakes per square mile.

Clearly, in Palau and elsewhere in Oceania, there is concern that both air and maritime transportation could assist the progression of this species across the Pacific Ocean and into areas where there are no natural predators and where the snakes will simply multiply.

Other Priority Species

In addition to the Nicobar Pigeon, the Palau Conservation Society has also identified the **Micronesian Imperial Pigeon** (*Ducula oceanica*) known locally as the Belochel, as a priority species. The Imperial Pigeon has “Near Threatened” status, owing to both habitat loss and being hunted for food by humans. There are no accurate estimates of numbers.

The Imperial Pigeon has featured on a couple of Palau stamps, here shown as the 45c value in a striking definitive set issued back in 1991. Unfortunately, this 45c value doesn’t quite do justice to the colourful plumage of the Imperial Pigeon. To see that, you have to refer to the stamps with this bird are the Marshall Islands, Micronesia and Nauru, as well as Kiribati.



That said, there is one additional stamp from Palau which shows the Imperial Pigeon in flight, so the red underbelly of the bird is visible. This particular issue dates from July 1996 and is one of 20 stamps that make up a sheetlet entitled “Lagoon Birds”, with the stamps in five rows of four. The Imperial Pigeon comes from the top row of four stamps.



Conclusion

The stamps of Palau issued by the IGPC include a generous quantity of bird stamps and by and large, do focus on birds from the Oceania region and in many cases, from Palau itself. The stamps are colourful and interesting. The older stamps do include definitive sets (some of which are still available) whereas the newer, contemporary issues, tend to be in sheetlets of four to six stamps, rather than printed as individual stamps: the definitive issues from 2002-2006 look to be the last of these types of issue.

In carrying out this research, I tried to find the website of the Palau Postal Administration or Service. I had assumed that there would be a nationally based postal authority in Palau. However, on looking through the UPU website, I could not find Palau listed as a member. Further searches indicate that the US Postal Service may well provide the local postal service, in part as a legacy of the American territorial involvement in Palau up and until independence in 1994.

This article is going to prove expensive, if I am to purchase each one that I have mentioned – following my principle of only writing about stamps that I own (or are about to own).

I would like to try to obtain some of the definitives in used format if they are available, in particular the Black Oystercatcher and Great Blue Heron, so that search for these starts now!

Sources

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