

Threatened Birds of Asia:

The BirdLife International Red Data Book

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BLUE-WINGED RACQUET-TAIL

Prioniturus verticalis



Critical —

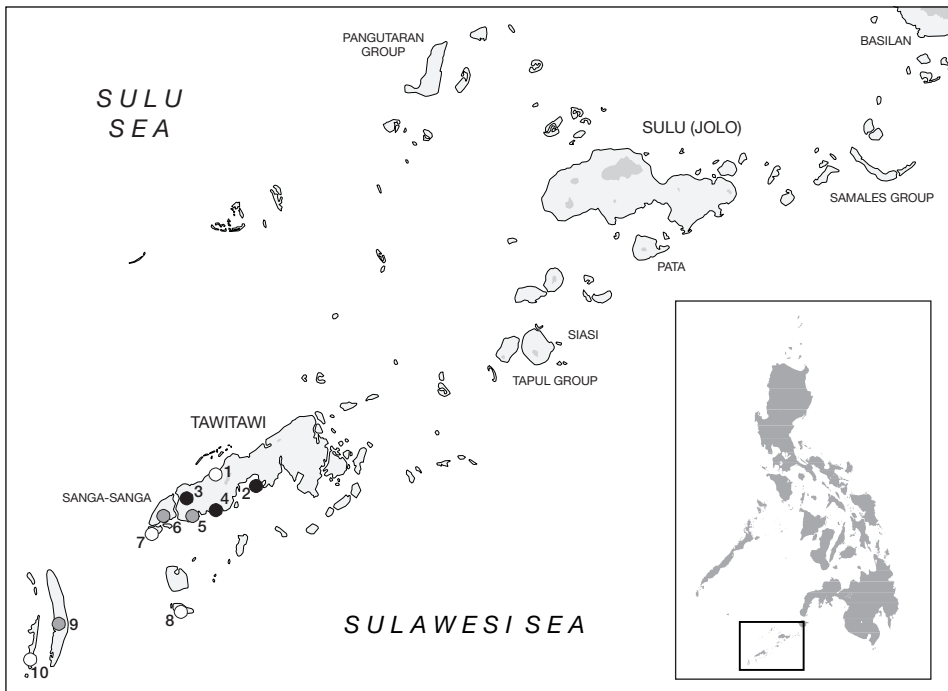
Endangered A2b,c; B1+2a,b,c,d,e; C1; C2a

Vulnerable A1a,c,d; D1

This parrot qualifies as Endangered because it has a very small and fragmented range and population which continue to decline. Furthermore, it is predicted to undergo a very rapid population reduction in the near future based on the declines observed in the past and a decline in the extent and quality of its forest habitat. It may soon qualify as Critical.

DISTRIBUTION The Blue-winged Racquet-tail is endemic to the Sulu archipelago in the Philippines. Records are from:

■ **PHILIPPINES** *Tawitawi* **Tataan**, October and November 1891, September 1892, July 1893 (seven specimens in CM, DMNH, USNM; also Sharpe 1894a, duPont and Rabor 1973a); **Buan**, August 1994 (G. C. L. Dutson *per* T. M. Brooks *in litt.* 1997); **Tarawakan**, August 1994 (T. M. Brooks and G. C. L. Dutson *in litt.* 1994, Dutson *et al.* 1996) and May 1995 (D. Allen *in litt.* 1996); **Parangan**, August 1994 (T. M. Brooks *in litt.* 1997); **Batu-batu**, December 1971 (two specimens in DMNH; also duPont and Rabor 1973a);



The distribution of Blue-winged Racquet-tail *Prioniturus verticalis*: (1) Tataan; (2) Buan; (3) Tarawakan; (4) Parangan; (5) Batu-batu; (6) Sanga-sanga; (7) Bongao; (8) Manuk Manka; (9) Sibutu; (10) Sitankai.

○ Historical (pre-1950) ● Fairly recent (1950–1979) ● Recent (1980–present)

Sanga-sanga unspecified locality, October 1971 (duPont and Rabor 1973a; also two males in DMNH);

Bongao unspecified locality, July 1893 (male in AMNH; also Sharpe 1894a);

Manuk Manka unspecified locality, January 1906 (female in USNM);

Sibutu unspecified locality, July 1893, January 1906, November 1971 (eight specimens in AMNH, BMNH, DMNH, USNM; also Sharpe 1894a, duPont and Rabor 1973a);

Tumindao Sitankai, August 1921 (two specimens in MCZ).

In addition, duPont and Rabor (1973a) referred to observations in 1971 of birds “over the densely vegetated areas of the larger islands in southern Sulu”, without specifying which (beyond those where they obtained specimens).

POPULATION In October 1891 on Tawitawi the species was clearly common, F. S. Bourns and D. C. Worcester noting it as “especially abundant in the high mangrove trees south of Tataan” (McGregor 1909–1910), although the use of mangroves may well have been for roosting and loafing, so that this was a temporary concentration that actually represented a much larger segment of the island population than the area could continuously support. It was also abundant in Sibutu town in January 1906 (Dickinson *et al.* 1991). By the early 1970s the situation had altered radically, with duPont and Rabor (1973a) reporting occasional observations of the species on Tawitawi, Sibutu and Sanga-sanga. By the early 1990s the position was considerably worse and apparently deteriorating by the year: Lambert (1993c) observed small numbers in the northern part of Tawitawi in September 1991, T. M. Brooks and G. C. L. Dutson (in Collar *et al.* 1994) saw only six racquet-tails in Tawitawi in August 1994, Sanga-sanga was found to be deforested (G. C. L. Dutson *in litt.* 1996), the species was considered unlikely to survive on Sibutu (D. Allen *in litt.* 1996), and in January 1995 Diesmos and Pedregosa (1995) failed to observe the species at all on Tawitawi and the Tandubas island group (this is not, however, to imply its extinction; see Remarks 1). There has been no report from Bongao, Tumindao or Manuk Manka for nearly 80 years.

ECOLOGY *Habitat* The Blue-winged Racquet-tail is a forest bird, including mangroves; a century ago it was “found in deep forest, but especially abundant in... high mangrove trees” (McGregor 1909–1910; but see Population for a caveat on this). Mangroves, of apparent importance for the Philippine Cockatoo *Cacatua haematuropygia*, are also of some significance for the racquet-tail, providing roosting and foraging (and potentially nesting) sites. Extensive tracts of mangrove in the south and east of Tawitawi could conceivably hold the species (D. Allen *in litt.* 1997). The record (see Population) from “Sibutu town” must clearly refer to forest edge adjacent to a cleared area, which is the habitat in which Lambert (1993c) made some of his observations (others were in forest), but he saw no racquet-tails in agricultural areas away from the forest.

Food In 1971 “single birds or pairs were sometimes flushed from fruiting trees in the dense patches of remnant forests in the interior” of various islands, climbing “actively but silently among the branches” (duPont and Rabor 1973a). Birds have been observed feeding in mangroves (D. Allen verbally 1997).

Breeding Birds were noted as in pairs in October–December 1971 (duPont and Rabor 1973a), although it is common for parrots to retain the pair-bond throughout the year. However, a female was observed at a nest-hole in a large stub in a grove of palms close to the forest in late September (Lambert 1993c), the female collected on Manuk Manka, January, contained an egg, and another from Sibutu, also January, was a juvenile (USNM label data).

Migration There is no evidence of any seasonal or other displacement in this species, whose range is clearly too restricted for any significant predictable shifts in numbers.

THREATS Observers in around 1987 and September 1991 considered that “extensive forest still exists” on Tawitawi (Krupa and Buck 1988, Lambert 1993c), but such forest (as seen from the air) appears actually to be young secondary growth (almost all trees are currently below 20 cm in diameter at breast height), and logging of the few remaining areas with large trees—almost entirely confined to rugged and mountainous areas—appears to be unsustainable and soon to be followed by uncontrolled settlement and full conversion to agriculture as the island develops and malaria is eradicated (D. Allen *in litt.* 1996, 1997). There is no primary forest now left on Sanga-sanga, only some heavily degraded areas of low forest (G. C. L. Dutson *in litt.* 1996, D. Allen verbally 1997). On Sibutu the steady erosion of topsoil has resulted in the permanent disruption of dipterocarp forest regeneration (Rabor 1977b). This cardinal problem is exacerbated by the human exploitation of large birds, including racquet-tails, for target practice. Unfortunately, many men on Tawitawi are armed with high-powered rifles and the racquet-tails, which are usually very tame, have in the recent past made easy targets (Lambert 1993c), although this practice may now have abated (D. Allen verbally 1997).

MEASURES TAKEN Apart from being listed on Appendix II of CITES none is known (but see equivalent section under Sulu Hornbill *Anthracoceros montani*). Coastal areas of the Sulus and Tawitawi have been proposed for FPE funding (see Appendix) but it appears that no progress has been made.

MEASURES PROPOSED The species is known from two “key sites” (Sibutu/Tumindao islands and Tawitawi; see Appendix) and these deserve considerable further research and formal designation, at least in part, under the NIPAS process. Immediate intervention is required to establish full protection for remaining forest patches on the Sulu and Tawitawi archipelagos as they still lack a single protected area. An integrated conservation strategy for these islands is required (D. Allen *in litt.* 1997) and should consider the needs of a suite of threatened endemic species (see equivalent section under Sulu Hornbill). Meanwhile, systematic surveys of the forested islands of the Sulu archipelago for this species and the other endemic birds is a priority. The situation of the racquet-tail on islands away from Tawitawi needs rapid investigation.

REMARKS (1) The species may be under-recorded, being very difficult to see (particularly while feeding) and with its calls (and appearance in flight, when the “racquets” are barely discernible) being difficult to separate from other parrots (C. R. Robson *in litt.* 1994, D. Allen verbally 1997). Conversely, given this difficulty in identification, it would seem desirable to confirm that all *Prioniturus* observed actually refer to Blue-winged Racquet-tail (D. Allen verbally 1997).