

A Sketch of the Life of Samuel White—  
Ornithologist, Soldier, Sailor, and Explorer.

By His Son, S. A. White, C.M.B.O.U.

XX. THE ORNITHOLOGIST AND SAILOR.

The bird next in importance to the Great Bird if not in beauty certainly in singularity of plumage is the little King Bird *Cicinnurus regia* of the naturalist, and called by the Aru

natives "goby goby." It is a small bird, and that which a collector would call a "gem". In its actions, habits, and call it is a miniature *P. Apoda*, and it seems as it were to mimmick the great bird, excepting in style and colouring of the plumage, which is deep glossy red on all the upper surface. The feathers on the front of forehead are of an orange tint, and short and hair-like, standing on end, and look like plush, the feathers extending beyond the nostrils; the throat and chest are shining purple red, a border of dark green crosses the breast, and the rest of the underplumage is pure white, but the side plumes, and these feathers are the greatest peculiarity. The side plumes are about an inch and a half long, about six or seven broad feathers, square at the ends, and are of a brown colour; and have a broad band of golden green near their tips. The tail is very short, extending no further than the ends of the wings, which are short and round, but the two central tail feathers are lengthened into two thin wires about seven inches long, crossing each other at the end of the tail, and diverging again at the tips. These wires take a spiral turn at their extremities, where they are broadly webbed, forming a button like tip to each feather or wire, and are of a deep shining green. Taken all together this bird is very peculiar and beautiful. Besides these, Birds of Paradise and other species were very numerous in places. Hawks were not plentiful, and I saw but two species. I did not see or hear any owls. Crows were not numerous. Saw a large fruit-crow with glossy-black plumage, beautiful blue eyes, and an enormous bill, this bird was not uncommon, but very shy. Parrots were plentiful, and of several species, and closely allied to those found in Australia, and several of the cockatoos were identical. Amongst the parrots were some very varied and beautiful birds, the same with the pigeons, especially the fruit pigeons, some of which were most gorgeous birds, and several species are found in Australia as well as the Aru's. Kingfishers were abundant, and of many species and colours, and several of the Australian species are found amongst them. Two species of swallows were seen—the edible bird-nest swallow and an Australian species. The former is remarkable for its nest, which is half-cup shaped, and attached to the walls of caves round the coast; it is composed of tough semitransparent gelatine, which the natives collect and sell in Dobo, to be sent to China as a delicacy. There are scrub turkeys (*Talagallus*), and Megapodes, both good for food, and the natives catch them in snares, but not very often. The eggs of the Megapode are very large and laid

in a mound to hatch in the same manner as the allied species in Australia. The Casowary we did not see, although I saw numerous traces of it and also its eggs. Quail and Finches I saw none nor did I see any country suitable for them. There was only one duck, the *Tadorna radjah* of Australia. Two cormorants, one all black and the other black and white. Several cranes were seen and collected, most of them Australian. Amongst them the well known Nankeen Heron (*Nycticorax caledonicus*). Perhaps amongst the aquatic birds none was more remarkable than the large brown rail. It is a fine bird as large as an ordinary fowl, but not so low set for they had fairly long legs. The natives call it "Sarah", and its beautiful large red eyes, the bright green bill and legs, as well as the blending of the soft brown and grey of the plumage claims the admiration of the naturalist, but the most remarkable thing about the bird is its tongue, its loud discordant craking is heard everywhere, where the land is low and wet. The slightest noise is taken as an excuse for a fresh outbreak, the report of a gun, or one man calling to another is sufficient to set a couple of them going at the top of their loud voices, but the bird is a difficult one to see or shoot. It is found in the thickest of the underbrush, and its long powerful legs carry it noiselessly from all danger. The natives sometimes catch them in snares which is the surest way of obtaining them, for while a man with a gun is struggling through thorny vines, these active birds have not the slightest difficulty in evading him.

—Fish.—

Fish in the waters around the Arus are plentiful and varied; they were seen in schools everywhere round the coast. The water at night was alive with them, and an incessant splashing was kept up, but to our surprise and disgust they would never take a bait, although we frequently tried, and although the vessel was surrounded by fish every night we never on any occasion caught a fish with hook and line. The natives catch large quantities. Their plan is to take a canoe near to the edge of the reef, and by the light of a fire spear them, or wade in shallow water with lighted torch in one hand and a spear in the other. The natives did not care to sell their fish. All the time we were at the Arus they did not offer a fish for sale, but when off the island of Trangan I purchased two small fish out of half a boat load by offering more than their worth of tobacco, but could get no more. The fish I have seen with the natives are varied in species. Many of

them look like those we call mullet, snapper, bream, rock-cod, parrot-fish, and many others, including "sting-rays" beautifully marked with green, blue, and white, indeed there seemed to be fish of all sizes, shapes, and colours. A species of flying fish seemed to be numerous. I observed them in numbers two hundred miles from shore. They were a small species, long and slender, of a silver-white colouration which made them conspicuous little objects in the bright sunlight over the dark blue water as they took their arrow-like flight of from 10 to 40 yards within a foot or so of the water's surface. They emerged suddenly from the water and maintained a straight course with the wind "abeam" or a little on the quarter, and when the sea rose before them they disappeared into it. Their transparent wings when in motion are not visible, giving to the fish a strange arrow-like motion. When near the coast small fish trooped about in countless thousands, and I have seen some curious scenes of destruction amongst them. Upon one occasion I observed an assemblage of small fish which seemed to be a few rods square and a few feet deep. They were so closely packed they could not steer, but had to all go in one direction. Behind these had collected about a dozen large sharks, and over them a thousand sea birds of various species and sizes. The sharks would at intervals make a rush forward with open mouth and engulf hundreds of the small fry at a time. At this time thousands of fish would make a simultaneous leap out of the water in a solid mass (as if they had been thrown up with shovels), and alight a few feet in advance to escape from the huge jaws of their monstrous enemy, but not to escape a host of hungry birds which instantly swoop down and each carry off a mouth full. This state of affairs went on for an hour or more, and I saw that as each shark, or bird had its fill it dropped behind, or soared in the air away from its still hungry mates.

—Insects.—

I was surprised to find that at the time of my visit the insects were not more numerous in the Arus than in tropical Australia at the same time of the year for it is well known that at the end of the rainy season in the tropics is the best time for insect life of every kind. However, I procured a few nice beetles from the natives as well as by my own collecting. If one day chanced to see a couple of dead specimens of two species of longicorns. I showed them to the natives and made them understand I wanted them, and would give tobacco and

beads for them. I soon had a good quantity of longicorns brought in, some in bamboos where they had bitten one another into pieces. Some had their legs tied to prevent them getting away; some were tied in bunches by their antennae, but to my horror many of them had all their legs torn off to disable them, others had their mandibles broken off to prevent them biting, but a good few were perfect. A small assortment of beetles and bugs was obtained. Lepidoptera were scarce, at least at this time of the year. I did not get more than a dozen species, and those were nearly all small, some of them are found in Australia, and others I have met with in New Guinea. Ants were not so numerous or varied as met with in Australia. The green tree-ant is the most plentiful. Millepedes, centipedes, and scorpions I saw of moderate size, but not very numerous. Spiders were far more numerous and varied; they spread their nets everywhere in the scrub to our annoyance. Some were large and had great expanse of limb, some were short limbed and heavy bodied, some were hard and others soft, some spiked all over, and there were others twice as broad as long. Some few species seem similar to species found in the southern part of Australia, and others closely allied to those found in Northern Queensland. Mosquitoes and sandflies were not so numerous or troublesome as I expected; they did not trouble us on board the yacht, but we found them both in the mangrove swamps. Wasps were not numerous we found to our great satisfaction, nevertheless the small nest building species were seen occasionally, and some of our party discovered that they could sting as vigorously as the Australian species with which they seemed identical. It seems a small fly not more than half an inch long, and builds a nest of leaves about the height of a man's head by drawing a number of large leaves together and fixing them with web. It is usually placed on the edge of the thick scrub or the small openings in the scrub, and is not easily seen. A number of the little pests cluster on the outside evidently on guard, and when an intruder approaches; fifty or a hundred attack him about the neck and face. It is laughable to observe a man who is sent in advance of you both walking stealthily through the scrub in search of game, suddenly seized with a fit of antics, throws down his gun, birds, bags, etc., throws his arms about, knocks off his hat, and makes a frantic rush through the thickest of the scrub regardless of thorns or tangle. If the man behind is an old hand he knows what is the matter, and darts off quietly in another direction and sits down, and

listens to his inmate (if addicted to profanity) indulging in a number of foolish and useless words. Presently he proceeds on hands and knees stealthily to where his property is lying, and recovers it as best he can without attempting one of the many vengeance he vowed against the wasps a few minutes ago. From my own experiences I can say their stings are severe for a short time. Although they do not last long and leave a lump for a few days, it is very annoying to find that although I have retained hold of everything in my hands I have while endeavouring to brush the insects off my face knocked my concave spectacles from my eyes. To recover them I have had to return and hunt them up amongst the dead leaves on the ground, perhaps to be attacked again. It will happen sometimes that the insects will enter the ear or nose and thus confined will sting three or four times, giving great pain with swelling and inflammation. I have found "Bary's Tricopherous" very useful in such cases.

#### —Reptiles.—

The reptiles of the Aru Islands are not plentiful. Small lizards are the most abundant; of snakes there appears to be few. I saw some very beautiful green ones with white markings, one seen was about five feet long; these are "Tree Snakes". A good many marine serpents were observed in the seas around the islands, but they were the same as found in Australian waters. One curious large lizard seemed to be fairly plentiful in the scrubs; it had a curious lappet under the chin edged with spikes, also a comb-like piece on the head also spiked. I have seen an allied species in Australia. Several large lace lizards were brought in, beautifully speckled with black and yellow. The natives brought frogs of gigantic proportions, fine fellows that measured a foot to fifteen inches from nose to toes. These were caught in the wet low country, or the banks of the small streams, sometimes up trees, and like the lizards were frequently shot with arrows. The frogs were huge creatures of a dull livid colour, lacking that brightness and vivacity some frogs possess, the ground colour was a dull dirty orange and brownish yellow. The creatures were brought tethered with a piece of rattan, and when placed in the sun laid themselves out and died without a movement. Some of the men ate them and pronounced them good. I am under the opinion that there are a few turtles round the coast, but none came to our share. The natives would not let turtle pass through their hands if they had it.

## —Vegetation.—

The vegetation is very similar to that found on the north coast of Australia, and the south coast of New Guinea. It is a dense tropical forest or scrub covering nearly every mile of surface of the low islands. On Trangan there is an exception, for the land is much higher, and a large portion of its surface is covered by tall coarse grass, and bare rocks stand up through it here and there, belts and patches of scrub cover the lower parts. Trangan is the most southerly of the large islands. Most of the trees and plants seen resemble those I have seen in Northern Australia with a few exceptions. I noticed a tree whose young shoots drooped in long bunches and tinted of various colours from a greenish or pinkish white to a scarlet, looking at a distance like blossoms. Another I had not seen in Australia was a mangrove with a large white or pinkish white flower resembling in shape a convolvulus; this was a straggling small tree, and grew in the salt water on the banks of the Watali Channel. The common mangrove grew to great perfection there. Some of the trunks were eighty feet long at least; some fine specimens grew on the banks of the Wannambi River. In some parts of the islands there were some magnificent trees very tall, but not very robust; among them were those that bore a large fruit like an orange, but was pithy inside. The nutmeg trees were very tall, and the fruit appeared in every way like those I have met with in Australia, and like them when the spice has arrived to perfection the brownish green pericarp opens and lets fall the nut covered with a network of scarlet mace, the nut is long in shape, barely half an inch through it, and scarcely an inch long. The tree which excited my admiration most was the *Casuarina*. They were noble specimens of the genus, some of them a hundred and fifty to two hundred feet high, and stout in proportion. They grew on the lowland bordering the coast, and were very conspicuous from seaward. The dark green almost black foliage and pointed tops of these trees was in marked contrast to the usual scrub foliage, forming a broken fringe all along the west coast of the islands (they did not grow inland). Under these trees grew palms, tree ferns, palm lawyers, and other plants, as well as creepers and vines in abundance. In places there were patches of large and tall bamboos, and wherever the native settlements were cocoanut palms were growing and bearing well. This is an introduction by order of the Dutch Government. The nuts appeared to me to be of fair size, and the flesh very thick.