
Moluccan starling (*Aplonis mysolensis*) in Menui island, Sulawesi: a new range extension to its known distribution

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INTRODUCTION

The Moluccan starling (*Aplonis mysolensis*) is endemic to Indonesia's Moluccan islands. It ranges from the islands of Morotai, Ternate, Halmahera, Bacan, Obi, Seram, Ambon, Haruku, Saparua, Buru and the Sula islands group, eastern Sulawesi, including the Banggai island and Peleng, and the west Papuan islands of Misool, Waigeo, Salawati, Batanta, Gebe, Ajoe and smaller islands (Birdlife International, 2015; Craig and Feare, 2009; Feare and Craig, 1999). Two subspecies, *A. m. mysolensis* and *A. m. sulaensis* are described (White and Bruce, 1986; Coates and Bishop, 2000), but most consider individuals inseparable from individuals elsewhere in its range. Therefore it is treated as monotypic (Craig and Feare, 2009; Feare and Craig, 1999).

Predominantly an island species, Moluccan starling occurs in mangroves and coastal woodland, primary lowland and hill forest above 1000 m, and in degraded forest in settlements and towns (Coates and Bishop, 2000; Craig and Feare, 2009). In New Guinea, the species is recorded in the north-west islands only, although it remains uncommon in forested and open habitat with trees (Pratt and Beehler, 2015). It is generally "moderately common to common" in most of its range, except for on Buru (Craig and Feare, 2009; Feare and Craig, 1999).

Menui island, southeast of Sulawesi, has been subject to very few ornithological surveys (Andrew and Holmes, 1990; Bishop, 1992; Coates and Bishop, 2000; White and Bruce, 1986; Whitten et al., 2002). To our knowledge, there existed no records of the Moluccan starling in southeast Sulawesi until recently (Balén et al., 2011; Balén et al., 2013; Tebb et al., 2008; Martin et al. 2014).

This paper describes a new observation of Moluccan starling on Menui.

METHODS

The study site is located on Menui island, Menui Kepulauan sub-district, Morowali district, Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia. Most of our observations took place around Terebino village (03°33'59.7"S; 123°09'43.6"E). The area consists of agriculture, settlement, mangrove forest and other forested areas. Various bird species were recorded during a bird watching trip conducted from 17th-20th December 2014. Bird species were observed and photographed for identification and documentation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

During a bird-watching trip from 17th-20th December 2014 on Menui island, we unexpectedly observed a starling individual that differed from, for example, Asian glossy starling (*Aplonis panayensis*). Both observers are familiar with Asian glossy starling, which is common on Sumatra and Sulawesi. In comparison to the Asian glossy starling, the observed bird had relatively longer tail, darkish eye and thicker bill. At Menui island, the observed starling was the only starling species recorded.

There are five starlings in the genus *Aplonis* that occur in Wallacea: Tanimbar starling (*Aplonis crassa*), Moluccan starling (*Aplonis mysolensis*), Short-tailed starling (*Aplonis minor*), Asian Glossy starling (*Aplonis panayensis*) and Shining starling (*Aplonis metallica*). The observed starling on Menui were distinguished from Short-tailed starling (*Aplonis minor*), Asian glossy starling (*Aplonis panayensis*) and Shining starling (*Aplonis metallica*) by its reddish eyes. The features did not match the Tanimbar starling (*Aplonis crassa*) either, which has a short square tail and is limited to Tanimbar island. The observed bird fits well with Moluccan starling described as having an entire black body, thick bill with strongly arched culmen (Fig.1),

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long graduated tail (Fig.1), black legs and brown iris (Coates and Bishop, 2000; Craig and Feare, 2009; Feare and Craig, 1999; Pratt and Beehler, 2015).

Menui island is a tiny island off Southeast Sulawesi, where the nearest previous location of Moluccan starling was Banggai (far eastern end of Central Sulawesi), Buru island west of Ambon and Seram islands in the Maluku province. The distances between Menui island to Banggai and Buru islands are approximately 200 km and 300 km, respectively. This record of Moluccan starling on Menui island may suggest a range extension for the species, but further surveys need to substantiate the island is home to resident individuals.

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Figure 1. The head of a Moluccan starling caught by local people in Menui island on 18th December, 2014 show distinct thick bill with strongly arched culmen. A pair of Moluccan starlings photographed on 19th December 2014 reveal its long tail (©Muhammad Iqbal).