

Letters to the Editors

Silvery Pigeon on Siberut, Mentawai islands, Sumatra, Indonesia

Dear Editors,

I read with great interest the recent articles (Lee *et al.* 2009, Li 2009) about the identification of Silvery Pigeon *Columba argentina* and the photographic evidence of a Silvery Pigeon on the Mentawai islands (Lee *et al.* 2009). In January 2009, I visited north-east Siberut in the Mentawai islands, and on the evening of 17 January about 90 minutes before sunset, I noted two largish pigeons flying inland over a stand of mature mangrove forest in the direction of adjacent tall secondary rainforest. I observed the fast-flying pigeons in good light conditions at an estimated distance of approximately 70 m. Both birds appeared roughly similar in size to Pied Imperial Pigeon *Ducula bicolor* but clearly appeared greyish instead of creamy-white as one would expect for Pied Imperial Pigeon. I did not observe any Pied Imperial Pigeons during my visit to Siberut but I am familiar with the species from observations in other parts of Indonesia, including coastal areas of Sumatra. As I was aware that the Silvery Pigeon might possibly occur in the Mentawai islands group, I spent several subsequent evenings exploring the mangrove belt and adjacent secondary forest in an attempt to find the pigeons again, but without success.

The identification of Silvery Pigeon requires great care due to its similarity to Pied Imperial Pigeon and its great rarity. Only observation at close range would allow an observer to note its diagnostic features such as the broad black band on the tip of the undertail, the reddish-brown orbital skin around the eye, the greenish bill with a reddish base (bill appears all dark in Pied Imperial Pigeon) and the more extensive white in the underwing (Li 2009). It was only after I looked at the published pictures of the Silvery Pigeon specimens that I wondered whether the strikingly grey appearance—so clearly visible on the pictures of the specimens—could also not be a useable field identification feature, albeit of course not diagnostic on its own, as juvenile Pied Imperial Pigeon can apparently approach this degree of grey suffusion of the plumage (Gibbs *et al.* 2001).

I would like to encourage birdwatchers to visit Siberut and look for Silvery Pigeon. The avifauna of Siberut is still poorly studied and may still hold some surprises. The same mangrove area in NE Siberut where I observed the pigeons also holds a good variety of other interesting bird species such as the globally threatened Storm's Stork *Ciconia stormi* and breeding Great-billed Herons *Ardea sumatrana*. The endemic Mentawai Scops Owl *Otus mentawi* and a yet unidentified Frogmouth *Batrachostomus* sp. may be seen in the adjacent secondary forest. Siberut is easily accessible by ferry from Padang, west Sumatra.

I thank Alan Lewis and Ding Li for commenting on my observations on Siberut and Brian Sykes for motivating me to write this note.

References

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In search of the Silvery Pigeon *Columba argentina* in South Sumatra province, Indonesia

Dear Editors,

The Silvery Pigeon *Columba argentina* is amongst the area's most poorly known species, and it is very likely that it has been overlooked and dismissed as Pied Imperial Pigeon *Ducula bicolor* (Li 2009). There are recent unconfirmed records from South Sumatra province as follows: Padang-Sugihan Wildlife Reserve (P-SWR), November 1984 and June 1985 (Nash & Nash 1985); 'large numbers' along the Sembilang River, now usually known as the Semilang National Park (SNP) in March 1989 (Verheugt *et al.* 1993); P-SWR, in November 1999 (Iqbal 2005); Way Kambas National Park, in neighbouring Lampung province in 1999 (Li 2009). However, none of these records completely eliminate the possibility of confusion with the Pied Imperial Pigeon.

After reading Li (2009), I am even more convinced that I observed Silvery Pigeon in November 1999 in P-SWR (Iqbal 2005), although I was not able to see important diagnostic features (especially eye-ring colour and the colour of the bill) that distinguish this species from Pied Imperial Pigeon. I saw three 'white pigeons' and one bird appeared paler than the other two. Li (2009) notes that the overall coloration of the Silvery Pigeon is pale bluish-grey, unlike the creamy-white of the Pied Imperial Pigeon. Although it was about ten years later, the illustrations in Li (2009) reminded me that the colour difference between the two 'white pigeons' I saw in P-SWR was very similar to the difference between the museum specimens.

Regarding the other unconfirmed records from the mainland of Sumatra, I think that the earlier report of Nash &

Nash (1985) from P-SWR is possibly correct, but the large numbers reported by Verheugt *et al.* (1993) in the SNP in March 1989 are possibly in error. The P-SWR is a peatswamp forest and the SNP is mainly a mangrove forest, both are located in the eastern part of South Sumatra province. From 2001 to late 2007, I worked part-time for Wetlands International-Indonesia Programme in the SNP, visiting the Sembilang River more than 15 times, but unfortunately observed neither Silvery Pigeon nor Pied Imperial Pigeon. However, I did observe a large flock of 300–500 Green Imperial Pigeon *Ducula aenea* on 10 April 2003 on the Terusan Dalam River (Iqbal 2006). Terusan Dalam is part of the SNP and approximately 30 km to the north of the Sembilang River. In addition, in February 2009, I photographed young Green Imperial Pigeons collected by fishermen from Sembilang village along the Sembilang River. I suggest that during February–April large numbers of Green Imperial Pigeon move to the SNP to roost and breed. Based on the absence of ‘white pigeons’ in the SNP during 2002–2007 (pers. obs) and the large numbers of Green Imperial Pigeons seen in mangroves in the SNP (Iqbal 2006) at the same time of year, I suggest that the large number of ‘grey pigeons’ reported by Verheugt *et al.* (1993) on the Sembilang River in March 1989 were Green Imperial Pigeon. Below, I summarise my suggestions for further exploration of South Sumatra province in search of Silvery Pigeon.

Padang-Sugihan Wildlife Reserve: I have visited the reserve a few times since 1999, but during an extended visit between May and August 2006, I found that the area had been degraded by settlers moving in as part of the transmigration programme, with forest converted to farmland, peatswamp forest burnt to make traditional ricefields and many surrounding areas converted to acacia forest for the Sinar Mas Group pulp industry. There is very little chance that ‘white pigeons’ will be found in the P-SWR in the future.

Belitung Islands: During January and February 2004, I visited Belitung and its satellite islands—these lie midway between western Borneo and southern Sumatra. Although Pink-necked Green Pigeon *Treron vernans*, Little Green Pigeon *Treron olax* and Green Imperial Pigeon were recorded during the visit, many pigeons were not identified. There are no historical records of Silvery Pigeon on Belitung Island but as in the Riau archipelago (Li 2009) peatswamp forest is still present, for example on Selat Nasik island, which I strongly believe is potential habitat for Silvery Pigeon.

Merang-Kepayang River: During August 2009, I visited the Merang-Kepayang River, an important peatswamp forest in South Sumatra (Lubis 2004) and the last remaining location of the False Gharial *Tomistoma schlegelii* in Sumatra. I interviewed 20 local people, all of whom frequented the forest, to explore the possibility that Silvery Pigeon occurred in the area. I found only one person who reported that he had seen a ‘white pigeon’ in Merang-Kepayang, but he was

able to describe some important plumage features. He said that this ‘white pigeon’ had pale plumage, a black underwing and the terminal half of the tail was entirely black. He saw one bird feeding with 20 green pigeons on the Kepayang River on 20 August 2009. Additional fieldwork in this area is needed to investigate further.

Sembilang National Park: Unfortunately, during the time I worked here in 2001–2007 there was no indication from either direct observation or local knowledge of Silvery Pigeon to suggest it occurred here. Then, on 13 July 2008 at 06h23, I saw a flock of 13 large pigeons over the Sembilang River which I suspected might be or might include Silvery Pigeon. Regrettably, the early morning sun was in my eyes when I saw the birds, making observation of coloration difficult and unclear. I saw birds with contrasting darker underwing compared with upperwing and darker undertail or darker terminal band, but I was not able to properly see the body coloration due to the sunlight. I am familiar with both Green Imperial Pigeon and the common green pigeons (*Treron* sp.) and I do not think the birds I saw that morning were members of these species. However, without any clear diagnostic features, this record is very tentative. I believe it is worthwhile to continue to check pigeons in the SNP.

I believe there is still a good chance of rediscovering Silvery Pigeon in south Sumatra. Sites mentioned above must be high priorities to look for the species and I am convinced that if a systematic survey can be conducted in south Sumatra, a population of this elusive bird will be discovered.

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