Timor and Sumba

Report on a birding trip to Timor and Sumba, December 2018

By Michael Grunwell

Figure 1 The fabulous open park-like forest of Mount Mutis, Timor
I currently live in Penang, Malaysia and am therefore concentrating on oriental birds. I have birded west and east Java, Bali and had a quick trip for Komodo dragon. Many years ago I birded Sulawesi and Halmahera. Eaton’s superb book inspired me to tackle the birds of the lesser Sundas, so I organised a trip in my Christmas break to visit both West Timor and Sumba.

The main reference was the superb trip report on the Lesser Sundas, Oct 2016 by Gareth Knass, see here: cloudbirders. My other key inspiration was the narrative description of the forthcoming Wings tour: https://wingsbirds.com/tours/indonesia-lesser-sunda-islands/

I do not have the money for a lovely tour but I can afford to stay in decent hotels and hire transport for the day so this trip is a half-way between the full-on 7000USD tour and Knass’s stay in homestays/hitch/travel on the cheap. Indonesia is a very cheap country, a very nice room in a 3-4 star hotel is around half a million (GBP25-40) a night per room. An all day motorbike with rider is 400k (GBP22), an all day car with driver is 800k (GBP45). When you consider that this is the sort of money you pay to hire a car in Sabah (no driver, fuel on top) then you realise what great value can be had.

So rather than stay overnight very close to birding sites which basically means a night in a shack, no AC, no hot water, no nice bathroom etc I chose to spend my nights in decent accommodation and travel to the birding sites every day.

This approach worked for me but it meant that I did not have the time to hang around for night birds, then again, waiting in a clearing, a km from a road, on my own, in the pitch black playing scary sounds is just not going to happen!

**Getting to Timor and Sumba**

I recommend the site www.flightsfrom.com to work out all the flights available. If you are going to include Flores then you can only access from the west via LBJ and from the east through Rudeng, but the only flights to Rudeng are from Kupang, Timor. That explains why Wings does its tour Sumba-Timor-Flores.

When I booked my flights I was trying to get the cheapest deal going overnight so as not to use precious daylight travelling. I ended up going Penang-KL-JKT-Surabaya-KOE, 4 flights. This proved exhausting and difficult, the biggest problem was transferring at 2am in Jakarta from the international terminal to the domestic terminal 2km away, the taxi drivers were demanding 500k (!) and the sky train had closed down for the night, I set off walking but ended up being picked up by the police and given a lift to the domestic terminal. Try to avoid connecting overnight through Jakarta international-domestic.

If I go to Timor again I will have a night in Jakarta and take the non-stop Garuda flight to Kupang.

Citilink (my flight) fly very early out of Surabaya to Kupang but that means taking the 4am connecting flight from JKT which means big problems transferring at night.

Getting between Timor and Sumba is no problem with regular flights between Kupang and Waingapu. However, getting to Sumba first is tricky as some flights go to Tambolaka in the west and some to Waingapu, looking on the web it seems that if you want to start in Sumba you are going to have to come in from DPS, Bali, (probably why Wings start in Bali).

When I booked my flights AirAsia back from Bali was cheap so I flew out of Tambolaka to DPS on the way home. It is a 4 hour drive from Waingapu to Tambolaka.

When I was on Timor I had planned to book a daytrip flight to Rote, however, this route is busy and the flights were full; you need to book this many weeks in advance. When I return to Timor I will book a day-return to Rote for one day and a day-return to Alor Island (ARD) on another.
Here is my itinerary.

Day 1: Arrived in Kupang at 09:30, went to the taxi office, got a taxi for a fixed price of 540k for the 2½ hour journey to Soe. Checked into the only decent hotel, Hotel Dena, booked through Booking.com. In the afternoon I took a motorbike to the nearby Air Terjun Oehala, my first introduction to Timorese birding. Night in Hotel Dena, Soe.

Day 2: My bike rider turned up as planned at 07:00, we spent the morning driving north to Mount Mutis, stopping at various places. By the time we had got up to the decent montane forest it was already 2pm, the track was now dropping and Mount Mutis proper was still in the distance so I called it a day and planned to return earlier the next day. Night in Hotel Dena, Soe.

Day 3: All day on a bike, we drove straight up to the montane forest, past where we turned round the previous day. We drove down to a small village below the peak of Mount Mutis, after some time we realised that we were not going to get any closer to the proper peak of Mount Mutis and spent the rest of the day working the park-like beautiful montane forests of what are called Mount Mutis but I believe to be technically another peak. Night in Hotel Dena, Soe.

Day 4: All day on a bike exploring sites reasonably close to Soe, found a site for Timor sparrow and a superb forest patch which gave good views of Timor thicketbird. Night in Hotel Dena, Soe.

Day 5: Arranged two days driving with Semry Taniu (a local fixer/driver/policeman who speaks English, phone +62 822 6608 2110) at 800k per day. Left the hotel, drove to Bipolo for a few hours then to Camplong, then back to Bipolo till dark then into Kupang. Night at Sylvia Hotel, Kupang.

Day 6: Arrived at dawn at Bipolo, then onto Camplong forest, back to Kupang for early afternoon. Night at Sylvia Hotel, Kupang.

Day 7: Took flight to Waingapu, arrived 10:30 met by Hans, (mentioned in the Knass report) drove to Yumbu, spent time driving around scrubby areas near coast and exploring the wetlands of Kadumbul. In the afternoon drove to km51 forest patch for three hours birding. Night in Padadita Beach Hotel, Waingapu.

Day 8: Arrived early at km51 forest, struggled to find decent birds, then along road to about km71, hard slog birding along road, returned early pm. Walked the beach at my hotel, night in Padadita Beach Hotel, Waingapu.

Day 9: 8am pick up from hotel, time at Yumbu and Kadambul, then two hours at km51 then a long drive to Tambolaka, night at Hotel Sinar, Tambolaka.

Day 10: Fly home, Tambolaka-DPS-KUL-PEN, way too long a day!

Hans is a local driver on Sumba. His number is +62 812 3978 4435. He is well connected, seems to know everyone, has a very nice car (the standard Toyota mini-MPV with a powerful 2.5L Diesel) and is happy to take it off-road and knows all the local roads and tracks to approach the water at Kadumbul. I strongly recommend him particularly as he charges a reasonable 800k per day (more for dawn to dusk).

For the rest of this report I will keep Timor and Sumba separate, some reports produce trip bird lists with the islands combined, I think it better to report separately.
Birding Timor.

Four major areas:

Bipolo forest and nearby wet open areas
Camplong forest
Mount Mutis area
Soe area.

Bipolo Forest. With no traffic it takes an hour from central Kupang to entering the forest. At rush hour times it can take much longer, we were stuck behind very slow trucks leaving Bipolo and it took nearly an hour just to get to the junction with the main road to Kupang.

Bipolo is an area of dry forest about a mile square. There are two main ways to access, firstly park just west of the river bridge (a very large dry riverbed when I was there in late Dec 2018) and then take the track north, after 100m it meets the river but there is a rougher track continuing north for another 200m before it peters out. I saw no birds of note in this area.

The second access point is to walk or drive south along the road to the west of the forest. There is a maze of tracks through the open forest. This area held several calling elegant pitta, a few rose-crowned fruit doves, and on a morning visit several calling Timor oriole. This is a great site for fawn-breasted whistler.

The nice thing about Bipolo is that when you have grown tired of walking the forest you can drive and check out the more open grassy areas by taking the road south about 1km west of the forest, fork left, following the signs for the salt works. I was with Semry and he has great diplomatic/fixer skills and we could get through the security gate and bird around the ponds. However, in late Dec 2018 the whole site was being redeveloped, there were a few birdless salt pans and a lot of dry plots, no sign of fish/prawn
ponds or any decent water. By far the best birding was on the way to the salt farm; on either side of the road were fallow paddies (Semry says they work them for two years then leave them fallow for a year), these grassy areas had some water and were a magnet for a huge flock of (nominate/intermedia) intermediate egret and two Royal spoonbill as well as a buff-banded rail close to the road.

It gets very hot very quickly in the morning and the forest goes quiet after 9am, this contrasts with my local forest in Kedah where birding tends to stay good until late morning. Just as we were leaving on the last morning driving back up the track bordering the SW forest we stopped to watch barred doves at a puddle, a tricoloured brush finch jumped out and an orange-banded thrush appeared on the forest floor.

**Camplong forest**

A large area of nice open woodland. On my first visit we went to the park on the north side, they tried to charge 100k for entrance but Semry fixed this. I did not realise that this small park is not where I should be birding but south across the road and along the tracks. I visited this area on our second visit but stupidly did not do the research with the Knass report where he clearly shows where to find black-banded flycatcher. Consequently, one of my major misses was BBF. The forest was full of calling birds but I have never been anywhere where the ratio of birds heard : birds seen is so high. I am terrible at calls with a neurological condition which does not allow me to recall sounds or music, I think the vast majority of
what I could hear was ashy-bellied white-eye. Australian brush cuckoo was common here. Timor leaf warbler was the incredible miss of the trip, not a sniff!

I recommend you spend a full half day at this site and don’t leave without BBF.

**Mount Mutis area.**

The Knass report describes where they found the Mount Mutis parrotfinch. It was not for lack of effort on my part that I failed to connect; hours spent walking the beautiful parkland habitat looking for birds. By far the commonest bird here is the noisy flame/yellow-eared honeyeater and white-eyes. Mountain white-eye is supposed to be up in the higher areas but I had good views at all altitudes of white-eyes that were all identical and looked like ashy-bellied. I am familiar with mountain and none of the birds showed the darker grey underparts. It is possible I am wrong but then lowland ashy-bellied must look identical to mountain and I do not think this is the case.

Olive-headed lorikeets were common in the highest forest constantly screeching and flying through the treetops but very difficult to get a decent view.

Timor whistling flycatcher were regular up here and I fluked onto a tricoloured brush-finch.

The track up to the highest areas is very rough, it is impossible to get a low-slung saloon car up there. You will need a decent high clearance vehicle (I would have got my Nissan Patrol up there in 2WD with short stretches requiring 4WD) or pillon on a bike. There were some places where the track was so steep and bumpy that I had to walk.

I would recommend you give this area at least one full day, you may get lucky and encounter MMPF, you will certainly enjoy the natural beauty. I was very lucky with the weather, warm dry and sunny all day though I can imagine that it is a different story with cloud and rain.
Figure 6 A typical scene near the summit of the ridge south of Mount Mutis

Figure 7 Semry (on right) fixer/driver in Soe with his mate Jack
The area around Soe.

On my last full day in Soe I used my biker to explore habitat around the area. I can recommend 4 areas for good birding.

**Air Terjun Oehala (Soe site 1)**

This is a local beauty spot with fast-flowing streams through wooded gullies. I found both Arafura and Timor fantail quite common here as well as Timor Myzomela. Well worth spending a couple of hours here.
River valley to NW of Soe. (Soe site 2)

I perused Google Maps for decent habitat near Soe, I made a mark (target2) and pillioned there first thing, some nice degraded forest but nothing special. We then continued west, the track goes down-hill until it meets the riverbed. Two birds flew up into a tree, I got on them and was amazed to be watching Timor sparrow! Is this a regular site or was I just lucky? They flew off after less than a minute.
Forest patch north of Soe. (Soe site 3)

On driving north on the main road from Soe, on your way up to Mount Mutis you pass through a short stretch of obvious thick natural forest. Park after 20m into the forest and there is a fence for livestock and a track to the west and a much longer track to the east. This track was quiet and I walked it several times, I always encountered pacific emerald dove, usually myzomela and whistling flycatcher as well as lots of ashy-bellied white-eye. If you are energetic you could walk up the steep slope into the higher forest, if you did this it would be worth several hours of your time.

![Figure 11 Forest patch on way north](image)

Good forest hidden away to NE of Soe (Soe site 4)

Drive for 10 minutes north of the forest patch, you come to a fork, the left fork goes through a village and is the route to Mount Mutis. Take the right fork, after 10 minutes the road surface ends, you go downhill and across a long bridge over a riverbed, then climb, take a very rough-looking track on the right and after 15 minutes of bouncing around you reach target 1 on the map. I may be rubbish at bird calls but I can smell birds on Google Maps, just where I had set my target was outstanding forest! There is a stretch of about 4km of high quality forest along this track. If it rains the track could well be impassable. The very best bit was just west of the sharp bend which gives a great view over forest and the river below. I had great views of Timor thicketbird and black-backed fruit dove here. I was there mid-afternoon, this site is well worth an early morning. It could well prove good for other pigeons and for Timor flowerpecker which proved impossible to find.
Figure 12 Good forest in relation to long river bridge

Figure 13 Close up of decent forest

—Turn right onto very rough dust/mud track

—Long bridge across riverbed

Superb forest along this rough track
**Summary of Timor trip**

On the positive side I had excellent weather and no logistics issues.

On the birding side I missed a lot of species and did not get to Rote Island.

If I return to Timor I will not bother with Soe and Mount Mutis but instead have these 4 days:

One day on daytrip to Rote Island
One day on daytrip to Alor Island
A full day at Bipolo
A full day at Camplong

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**Best birds seen on Timor, 15 – 20 December 2018**

_Bird names as per Eaton. Sites described above. e.g. SS2 = Soe site 2_

Pacific Emerald dove: 3 or 4 birds seen on the track running east, SS3. This seemed to be a very reliable site.

Black-backed fruit dove: a _cinctus_ at SS4

Rose-crowned fruit dove: at least 4 birds at Bipolo, often calling.

Australian brush cuckoo, heard at SS4, often calling at Camplong, seen chasing around in treetops

Lesser coucal: A few at Bipolo

Drab swiftlet: A very common bird, particularly in montane areas.

Buff-banded rail: One flushed close to the road at the Bipolo fallow paddies.

(Australian) gull-billed tern: One huge bird flying near the Bipolo salt works

Royal spoonbill, 2 birds feeding on the Bipolo fallow paddies.

Intermediate egret, very large numbers midday on the Bipolo fallow paddies, some were with dark breeding bills pointing to nominate _intermedia_ rather than the Australasian _plumifera_.

Brown Goshawk: One perched at SS3

Collared kingfisher: A few in the montane forest.

Rainbow bee-eater: Quite common at Bipolo

Indonesian kestrel: One high over in last village before Mount Mutis proper.

Olive-headed lorikeyet. Noisy flocks in the highest eucalypt montane forest, very difficult to get good views.

Elegant pitta: Often calling at Bipolo, a few good views

Indonesian honeyeater: a few at SS3 and SS1

Yellow-eared honeyeater: Very common in montane forest, less so at Camplong, a few at Bipolo

Timor myzomela, seen well at SS1, SS2, SS3, SS4 and Camplong and Bipolo, not difficult.

Timor meliphaga: seen at SS2, Camplong and Bipolo
Timor Gerygone, seemed commonest at mid-elevation, SS1, SS2, SS3, SS4 and Camplong
Timor oriole: at least 4 birds calling at Bipolo, one brief view, stick to canopy.
Tengarra whistler. Good views of singing male *calliope* at Camplong and SS3.
Fawn-breasted whistler: good views of singing birds early at Bipolo.
Wallacean cicadabird: A pair at SS2
Lesueur’s triller: A common bird at SS2, SS3, SS4 and Camplong
Supertramp fantail (lumped as Arafura on IOC): Often seen at Camplong, SS1, SS3 and Bipolo
Timor fantail (lumped as Northern on IOC) Often seen around Soe, Camplong and Bipolo.
Crow sp: I had a very glossy flat-headed crow in the montane forest, no clue.
Tree martin: A small group on the way up to Mount Mutis, not seen again.
Sooty-headed Bulbul, quite common, introducing a generalist feeder like this to Timor is a particularly bad idea.
Ashy-bellied white-eye: Very common at high and mid levels
Timor thicketbird: Great views at SS4
Double zitting cisticola: A great name for this form! A few at Bipolo.
Golden-headed cisticola: A few at Bipolo.
Orange-banded thrush: One seen well at Bipolo
Timor warbling-flycatcher. Seen at SS2, SS3, Mount Mutis and Bipolo
Little pied flycatcher: A male at SS1
Pied bushchat: Common in open areas at all elevations
Timor bushchat: Some nice views along the road before SS3
Red-chested flowerpecker (still lumped on IOC as blue-cheeked) Seen well at SS4 and Bipolo
Flame-breasted sunbird: a brief view at SS1
Tricoloured parrotfinch: One popped out on the way up to Mutis, another briefly at Bipolo.
Sunda zebra finch: Common in open areas around Bipolo.
Timor sparrow: presumed pair by the riverbed at SS2.
Paddyfield pipit: common in open areas.

*Birds missed:*

Of the true Timor endemics I missed a load of doves and parrots, but none of these are easy. The seven I missed that I really wanted are:
Timor figbird and friarbird: more time in lowlands finding fruiting trees?
Timor heleia: back to Camplong?
Timor leaf warbler: The outstanding miss, did not see this bird, though maybe heard?
Timor stubtail: A hopeless case: I cannot hear the high-pitched call on the tape so what chance do I have if one responded? I still tried often but no luck.
Black-banded flycatcher: Need to spend time at the right place at Camplong.
Timor flowerpecker: Obviously difficult.

I picked up a few species missed in Timor in Sumba: Broad-billed flycatcher, Tengarra flowerpecker and five-coloured munia.

**Birding Sumba**

*Three major sites:*
Yumbu bridge area
Kadumbul wetlands
Forest around Lewa.

**Yumbu bridge area.**

Head east out of Waingapu, if I recall, the 16km marker is 50m west of the bridge. Yumbu is a mangrove filled inlet with a box bridge carrying the road. On all sides are open grazing areas. I found little long grass due to lack of rain and over-grazing. The grassy slopes on either side of the gulley are steep but I had two buttonquail flushed on the east slope. I found the hilly areas were difficult to walk being a lava field (or coral bed?) covered with thin soil. I travelled around coastal scrub with Hans and he took me to some nice fields where he said buttonquail are common, we had a pair cross the road in front of the car midday so they must be reasonably easy in this area. It may be worth simply not walking around Yumbu but just cruising areas with Hans until a buttonquail appears. In the end I saw 4 buttonquails. Am I sure they were Sumba rather than red-backed? Never got a clinching view but is red-backed really in this coastal grassland?
Figure 15 Close up of Yumbu bridge area

Figure 16 A view looking north to Yumbu bridge
Figure 17 Hans at Yumbu

Figure 18 Horsfield’s Bushlark *Mirafra javanica parva* at Kadumbul
Kadumbul wetlands area.

This area is described glowingly in the Wings’ brochure. I am sorry but I cannot give a decent map because Google maps does not seem to show the areas of water I was taken to by Hans.

I suggest you employ Hans as he lives locally and knows all the back trails and approaches to the water. Please note that the extent of water is seasonal, I was there at a minimum, the rainy season is Nov-Feb but there had been little rain in the east. Hans suggests Feb/March as a time of maximum water and hence the most water birds.

I visited twice with Hans, hunting is a huge issue here, for every flock of duck you find there will be a hunter stalking them. There was an unfortunate situation with hunters holding an injured wandering whistling duck, Hans was able to defuse a potentially ugly incident (on my part). Not a place to linger if you have a problem with hunters.

I had a big flock of wandering whistling duck and on my first visit had a group of 12 hardhead. Strongly recommend giving this place time.

On our last visit Hans drove for miles on back roads looking for buttonquail. We found two Horsfield’s bush lark here.

Forest near Lewa

Many reports discuss all the various stops along the road. The key site is km51 as you can get off the road and bird in peace in decent forest. The km51 marker is 5m before the track on the left to the forest. Pass by houses on both sides, walk along a ridge top, the main path veers right and ends at a fenced field near forest. If you bear left and take the well-marked path to the forest I guess this is Knass’s first patch. The clearing described by Knass is full of 2m-tall vegetation. If you stick to the path it becomes very wide in places and goes through several patches of decent forest. I walked about 2km but could see no end to the forest. This place needs working by a team, not a lone observer. I struggled to find birds and overall this was the biggest disappointment of the trip. No red-naped fruit dove or Sumba green pigeon. Of the three endemic flycatchers I only found Sumba flycatcher.
Figure 20 km51 track looking away from the road

Figure 21 km51 track looking back to road. Note the iconic roof shapes on Sumba
There is good forest from km68 to km72 but it is difficult to bird with the traffic. If I had more time I would pay the NP entrance fee and get a guide to take me around the proper forest. If you come here as a team you will probably find all you want at km51.

Coastal birding at Waingapu

My hotel, Padadita Beach was on the shoreline, I walked out at low tide and was surprised by the quality of birds. Grey-tailed tattler was the commonest wader with greater sand plover and distant greater crested terns.

Summary of my time in Sumba

Positives: Using Hans, finding the water at Kadumbul, good weather.

Negatives: Struggling to find birds in the Lewa forest

If I returned I would want to be with others so I can have a go for night birds.
Best birds seen on Sumba, 21 – 23 December 2018

Bird names as per Eaton.

Wandering Whistling-duck Over 200 birds in one area at Kadumbul
Hardhead 12 birds at Kadumbul
Pacific black duck 12 birds at Kadumbul
Barred dove Common in lowlands
Asian emerald dove One at km51
Black-naped fruit dove A male at km51
Green imperial pigeon 2 at km51
Oriental/Himalayan cuckoo One in the mangroves at Yumbu
Tengarra swiflet Common around Lewa
Nightjar sp. One caught in headlights halfway up hill before dawn, could well have been Mee’s.
Australian swamphen At least 4 birds of the samoensis form at Kadumbul
Common moorhen At least 10 birds seen at Kadumbul, none looked like dusky.
Black-winged stilt I was not paying attention to waders, there was a solitary stilt with an all-white head. I did not realise that the stilts here are supposed to be pied so this may be a good record.
Pacific golden plover One at Kadumbul
Grey plover 2 on beach at Padadita beach hotel
Greater sand plover A few on Padadita beach
Grey-tailed tattler 25+ on Padadita beach
Whimbrel A few Siberian variegatus on Padadita beach
Sumba buttonquail 2 flushed at gulley slope SE of bridge, 2 walked across road in coastal scrub.
Greater crested tern A few offshore from Padadita beach
Little pied cormorant One at Kadumbul
Purple heron A few at Kadumbul
Javan pond heron One in breeding plumage at Kadumbul
Brown goshawk One seen a few times near km51
Blue-tailed bee-eater Fairly common in lowlands
Rainbow bee-eater A few around Kadumbul
Common dollarbird 2 at km51
Peregrine falcon One near the quarry SE of Yumbu bridge
Helmeted friarbird Birds calling and some seen well at km51
Tengarra whistler  A singing *fulviventris* just beyond the new bridge across the river to the east of km72

Pale-shouldered cicadabird. Excellent views of a male behind the green shelter set back from the road at about 71km

Supertramp fantail  A few around Lewa

Sumba spangled drongo  Fairly common around Lewa

Tengarra paradise flycatcher  km51, a white male glimpsed, excellent views of the distinctive female.

Broad-billed monarch  One near Kadumbul

Grey-headed canary flycatcher  2 at km51

Cinereous tit  One at km51

Australasian bushlark  Two around Kadumbul

Pacific swallow  Few

Daurian swallow  Few at km51 and Yumbu

Sooty-headed bulbul, same comments as for Timor

Wallace’s heleia  Fairly common at km51

Ashy-bellied white-eye  A few at km51

Kamchatka leaf warbler. Two winters ago I was puzzled by the *phyloscs* giving this loud, dry trill on Rinca. I learnt then it belonged to Kamchatka leaf warbler. This bird was fairly common at km51. Some good views and I could imagine the marginally longer bill compared to Arctic, the very active feeding pattern is in contrast to the slow plod of an arctic.

Short-tailed starling  One near km72

Javan mynah  Presumed this species; fairly common around Yumbu. I am good with mynah and my first impression was jungle rather than Javan, could not be sure.

Chestnut-backed thrush  Presumed this species singing at km51 but I could not get a view

Sumba flycatcher  good view on one at km51

Pied bush chat  Few seen

Tengarra flowerpecker  Two at km51

Sumba flowerpecker  Seen at km51, a singing roadside male at km69

Brown-throated sunbird  A few at km51

Apricot-breasted sunbird  A nice singing male at km51

Sunda zebra finch  Fairly common around Kadumbul

Five-coloured munia  A few seen around km51

Eastern yellow wagtail  A few around Kadumbul

Paddyfield pipit  Fairly common in all open areas
Missed birds:
Way too many!
No chance of night birds. I may have had orange-crested cockatoo calling at km51. No sign of Sumba hornbill, myzomela, red-naped FD or Sumba GP.
Missed on Sumba warbling and Sumba brown flycatchers.
On balance only worth my while to return to Sumba if with a group and so can try for night birds.

Figure 23 The trail at the forest patch (SS3) Timor

I hope you found this report useful, feel free to use and quote as you wish but you should cite as:

Grunwell, MJ, Birding Timor and Sunda, December 2018

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