

Ecological observations on Sanford's Sea-Eagle *Haliaeetus (leucogaster) sanfordi*

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Summary. Field observations of Sanford's Sea-Eagle *Haliaeetus (leucogaster) sanfordi* were obtained in the Solomon Islands (Choiseul, Tetepare, Rendova, Kolombangara, and Vella Lavella) from January 2006 to October 2011. Sanford's Sea-Eagles were encountered in coastal, lowland and montane forests (to 1100 m above sea-level), open human-modified habitats, and along a river through primary rainforest. Predation or attempted predation was observed on soaring Glossy Swiftlets *Collocalia esculenta*, Solomons Flying-foxes *Pteropus rayneri* leaving their roosts and a Prehensile-tailed Skink *Corucia zebata*. Ecological release may explain this eagle's wide habitat and dietary niche in the Islands, but other evidence (morphology, vocalisations) suggests that lumping it with the White-bellied Sea-Eagle *H. leucogaster*, on limited DNA evidence, may be premature.

Introduction

We present firsthand observations of Sanford's Sea-Eagle *Haliaeetus (leucogaster) sanfordi* that add to limited knowledge of the foraging habits and habitat requirements of this endemic raptor of the Solomon Archipelago. Records of it date back to 1568, in expedition journals of the first European explorers to reach the Solomon Islands (Mayr & Diamond 2001). However, it was reported as immatures of the White-bellied Sea-Eagle *H. leucogaster*, until it was afforded full species status in 1935 (Mayr 1935, 1936).

Recently, phylogenetic studies have reported very short genetic distances between the Australian taxon *H. leucogaster* and Sanford's Sea-Eagle, suggesting that *sanfordi* is a subspecies of *H. leucogaster* (Debus 2006; Christidis & Boles 2008). However, many authors retain species status for Sanford's Sea-Eagle based on differences in morphology, behaviour and geographic isolation, as well as the scant nature of most genetic studies (i.e. only partial sequences of single mtDNA gene regions: see Wink *et al.* 1996; Ferguson-Lees & Christie 2001; Wink & Sauer-Gürth 2004; Lerner & Mindell 2005; Birdlife International 2011).

Very little is known about the ecology of this elusive bird, a raptor with one of the most restricted ranges in the world and classified as vulnerable on the IUCN Red List (BirdLife International 2008). We present ecological observations from Choiseul, Tetepare, Rendova, Kolombangara and Vella Lavella, Solomon Islands. Observing Sanford's Sea-Eagle closely has been difficult, with limited firsthand