

# Waltzing With Wallace's Standardwing

After the razzle-dazzle of an elaboate courtship, it's all done in four seconds. Perhaps only once in a blue moon do you get to see these dream Birds of Paradise so closely. **Bjorn Olesen** celebrates Alfred Russel Wallace's centenary in the most unbelievable way possible.

Text & Photos by **Bjorn Olesen**

## THE CAPTURE

Halmahera, 22-28 September, 2012

Searching the Internet, you realize there are not many quality images showing the Wallace's Standardwing in elaborate 'ritualistic' action. This was a challenge that I, as a wildlife photographer, could not resist. The main display season is from April to December, but according to the local guide, there is some *lek* activity throughout the year. Locally the Standardwing Bird of Paradise is called *burung bidadari* or 'fairy bird'.

I spent a week in central Halmahera, North Moluccas, with the single-minded objective of seeing the male Standardwing performing its spectacular acrobatics to attract the attention of the female, and if at all possible, also 'capturing' a rare mating scene, as recorded by BBC back in 1996.

Wake-up call every morning was at 4:30 am with a cup of coffee and some fresh fruit. We arrived at the *lek* around 6:00 am after a half-hour trek lugging 15 kg of equipment in the



**On the approach of a female, the male went into a frenzy and performed some unique aerial acrobatics leaping up in the air and descending on fully-extended wings with the white plumes flaring outwards. Upon landing, as we can see, the iridescent blue-green breast shields were clearly exhibited.**

pre-dawn darkness along a narrow trail through the undulating forested hillside. Luck was on our side, no rain apart from one morning of bad weather, and it was only me and my guide watching the early morning show.

An interesting view from below with one male and a pair of females. The two breast shields were completely expanded, and the male touched the throat of one of the females with two of his long, white elongated plumes, as he fluttered his outstretched wings.



The male has an odd-shaped bill with prominent upper ridge and a buffy forehead tuft. Its vanity wardrobe consists of large blue-green breast shields, short central tail feathers and long, white 'standards' (extensive plumes on the wings).



Standardwing female is drab and brown, and lacks the male's breast shields and long plumes on the front of the wings.

## THE GREAT NATURALIST



**Alfred Russel Wallace** (1823–1913) was a British naturalist and explorer known for proposing some challenging ideas on natural selection that could have arguably influenced Charles Darwin's own famous Theory. Wallace's time in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and New Guinea, from 1854 to 1862, has been colourfully described with much detail in his classic, *The Malay Archipelago*.

Singapore was Wallace's base to this region, and his discoveries led to the notion of the 'Wallace Line' dividing Indonesia into two distinct parts, one in which species are largely of Asian origin, and the other where they relate more to those of continental Australia.

His scientific discoveries in South-east Asia include Wallace's Standardwing Bird of Paradise, Wallace's Golden Birdwing Butterfly and Rajah Brooke's Birdwing Butterfly.

2013 is the 100th anniversary of Alfred Russel Wallace's death. A significant number of events will be held worldwide to celebrate his living legacy.

The courtship display and bird calls would start about 6:20 am. The entire ritual peaked at 6:40 am and ended just after 7:00 am, when the Standardwings would prune their feathers, sometimes eating fruit before disappearing further up the hill-side to forage.

I will never forget the semi-dark mornings spent at the display site watching the noisy performance in the canopy above from a small hide-out window. Initially, each male would defend his own display arena with static postures and vibrating wings, causing the white standards to wave in many directions. It looked like the younger

**The courtship display and bird calls would start about 6:20 am. The entire ritual peaked at 6:40 am and ended just after 7:00 am.**

and less-dominant males were relegated to other trees on the fringe of the *lek*.

Later, during the courtship display, several males would call loudly, again sticking out their four brilliant white plumes, and extending their breast shields in the hope of attracting a female. The males were always outnumbering the females, and on one occasion no females showed up at all.

I still wonder what role does their

very elaborate plumage play? Most of the courtship display, after all, is done in the dark before sunrise.

The high point of the trip was a sequential 33 images I took of a 4-second mating scene at 6:27 am just before the sun came up. Suddenly, all the wait and insect bites were forgotten. To witness such a performance of the legendary Wallace's Standardwing Bird of Paradise is an experience of a life-time. 🌿

## WALLACE'S STANDARDWING

*The Standardwing, named Semioptera wallacei by G.R. Gray, is an entirely new form of Bird of Paradise, discovered by myself on this island of Batchian, and especially distinguished by a pair of long narrow feathers of white colour, which spring from among the short plumes which clothe the bend of the wing, and capable of being erected at pleasure ...*

*The female bird is remarkably plain, being entirely of a dull pale earthy brown, with only a slight tinge of ashy violet on the head to relieve its general monotony; and the young males exactly resemble her ...*

*This bird frequents the lower trees of the forest, and like most Birds of Paradise, is in constant motion-flying from branch to branch. The males at short intervals open and flutter their wings, erect the long shoulder feathers, and spread out the elegant green breast shields ...*

*This is the only Bird of Paradise yet found in the Moluccan district, all the others being confined to the Papuan Islands and north Australia ...*

**Adapted from Alfred Russel Wallace's great classic, *The Malay Archipelago*, which was first published in 1869.**

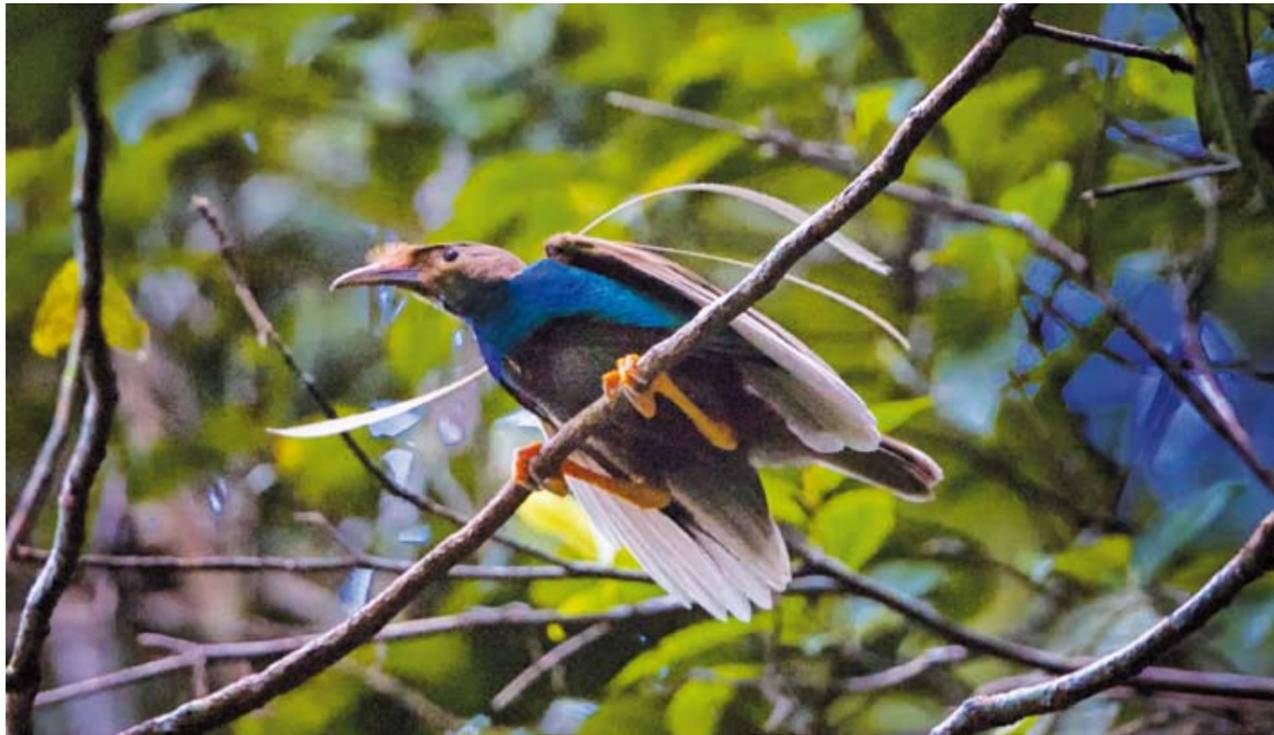


WALLACE discovered the extraordinary Standardwing Bird of Paradise in 1858, and after that it was not seen for almost six decades, and then only less than a dozen times up to the 1950s. No further sightings were reported until 1983 when the UK ornithologist David Bishop 'rediscovered' the species, and began making detailed studies of the Standardwing.

Later, in 1996, the Standardwing was made famous in BBC's TV documentary series 'Attenborough in Paradise', and since then birds of paradise have become some of the most sought-after species by birders and photographers from all over the world.

Wallace's Standardwing is endemic to North Moluccas (Halmahera, Bacan & Kasiruta Islands), inhabiting primary and selective logged lowlands and hill forests. Away from the display sites (*leks*), it is inconspicuous, difficult to observe and easily overlooked when not calling. It forages in the mid-storey and lower canopy feeding on fruit and arthropods.

**Left: The Wallace's Standardwing forages in the mid-storey to lower canopy and feeds on fruit and invertebrates. This male was enjoying the red fleshy aril covering the black seed of the fruit *Knema cinerea*.**



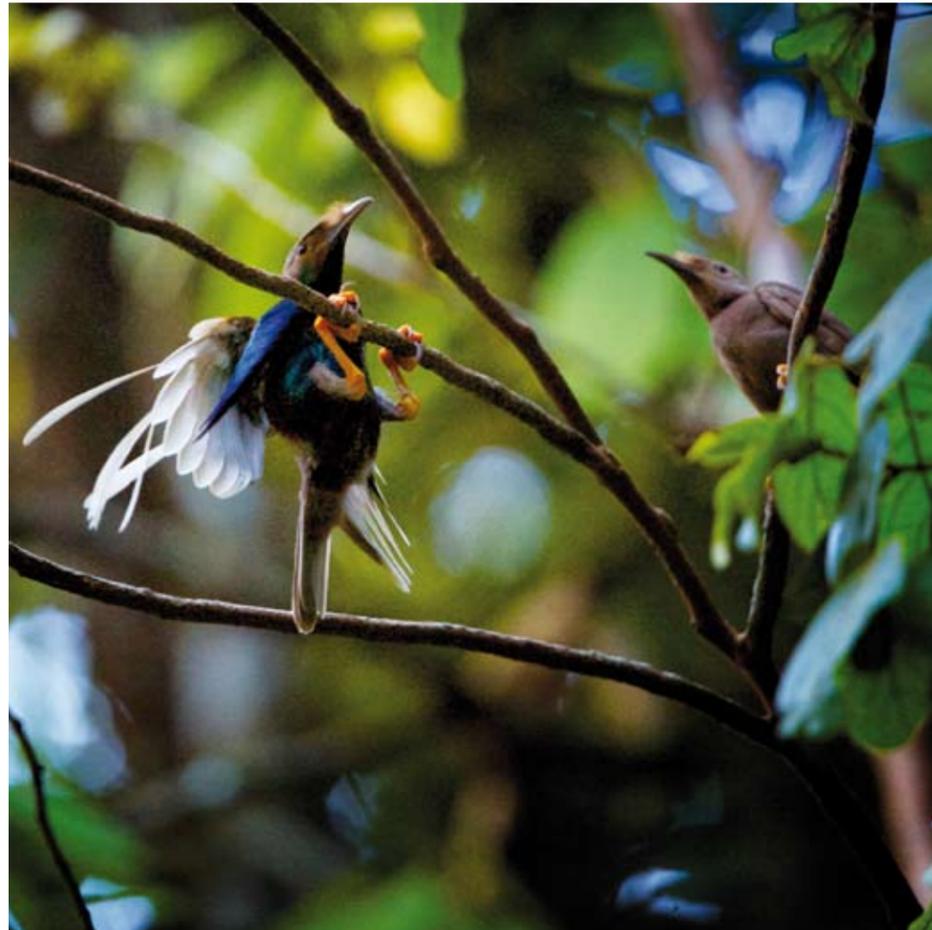
The males were the first party to arrive at the lek before sunrise, around 6:15 am. Full of noise by then, you can hear a distinct wing-rustling in flight.



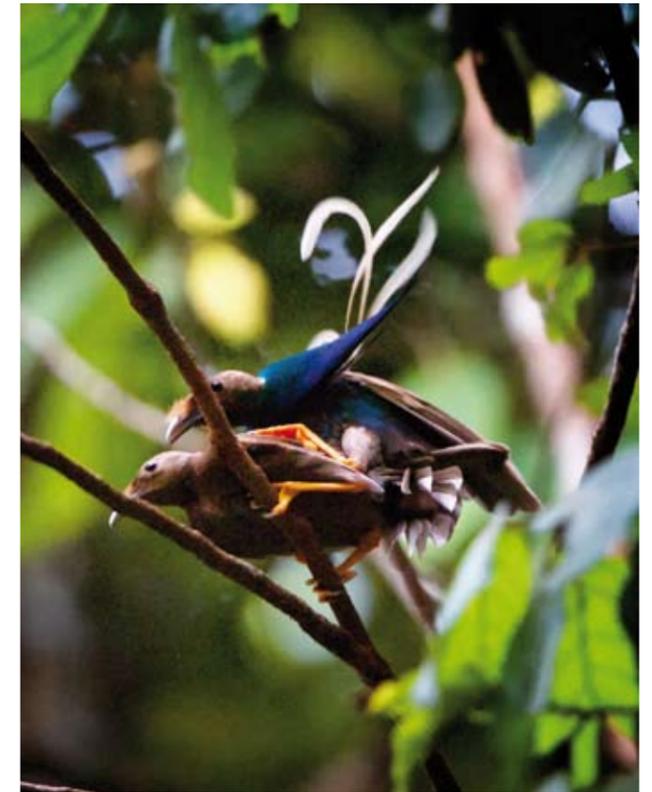
Depending on the light and the angle, the brilliant, iridescent colours of the male change from green to blue.



Males started fluttering their outstretched wings and simultaneously expanding their brilliant metallic blue-green breast shields in ornamental display.



Finally got there! This male positioned himself on the most prominent perch in the lek and attracted a female. When capturing this scene at 6:37 am in very dim light, it was not possible to see the female. I discovered the 'bonus' only after uploading the image onto my computer back at the camp.



Don't blink. This rarely-recorded Wallace's Standardwing mating scene in open view lasted less than 4 seconds, with the wings of the male opening and closing while the cream-white feather standards danced vertically in the air. At the same time, a series of nasal barks could be heard getting louder towards the end. Even fellow males would answer such calls.

## REFERENCES

Coates, B. J. & K. D. Bishop (1997) *A Guide to the Birds of Wallacea: Sulawesi, the Moluccas and Lesser Sunda Islands, Indonesia*. Dove, Australia.

Wallace A. R. (2009) *The Malay Archipelago* (first published 1869). John Beaufoy, Oxford. pp. 515-516.

Holland, J.S. "Feathers of Seduction" in *National Geographic*, Jul 2007.

Quammen, D. "The Man Who Wasn't Darwin – Alfred Russel Wallace" in *National Geographic*, Dec 2008.

<http://people.wku.edu/charles.smith/wallace/BIOG.htm>

<http://wallace-online.org/>

<http://wallace-online.org/content/search-results?freetext=standardwing>

<http://australianmuseum.net.au/Wallaces-Standardwing>

<http://wallacefund.info/biography-wallace>

*Bjorn Olesen is a retired corporate executive and an award-winning wildlife photographer. A passionate conservationist, he is a long-term resident of South-east Asia and an NSS member. All his images are available free-of-charge to non-profit conservation organizations. With his wife Fanny he has just published a book, A Visual Celebration of Giant Pandas. All royalties from the sales will be donated to WWF. Bjorn can be contacted through his website: [www.bjornolesen.com](http://www.bjornolesen.com)*