

NOTES ON THE MA'O (*Gymnomyza samoensis*), A RARE SAMOAN HONEYEATER

By RONALD I. ORENSTEIN

The Ma'o (*Gymnomyza samoensis*) is the largest and rarest of the three Samoan honeyeaters (Meliphagidae). Little has been recorded about it. Armstrong (1932) found it uncommon. More recently, Clapp & Sibley (1966; summary of Pacific Ocean Biological Survey Program expeditions) and Kaigler (1973) failed to find it on Tutuila, where it may be extinct. Dhondt (1976) did not definitely record the species during sixteen months' residence on Upolu.

It is therefore useful to record two brief observations I made of the Ma'o during a visit to Upolu, Western Samoa on 23-25 June 1974. Both sightings were in the hill forest near Tiavi Falls, south of Apia. The first bird was found on the 24th and 25th. I saw presumably a single individual both days in the same large tree at the extreme end of a side road running west of the road to Tiavi Falls. My attention was attracted to it by its distinctive calls, a series of low, hoarse, nasal mewling notes at times rising in pitch and developing into loud upslurred clear yelps, then falling back again. Bouts of calling lasted at least a minute, producing an effect not unlike a cat-fight. These were presumably the 'peculiar wailing' calls Whitmee (1875) mentioned as an inspiration for the superstitious attitude of the Samoan towards the Ma'o. The bird kept to the interior of the tree, moving from branch to branch in hops. It kept its head low, and continuously waved the tail slowly and regularly up and down through at most an estimated thirty-degree angle. This tail movement did not 'keep time' with the calls. In shape the bird recalled a friar-bird (*Philemon*), with its large head, thin neck and long tail.

A sequence of calls of this bird was recorded with a cassette tape recorder. Figure 1 gives sonagrams of characteristic notes. For comparison I include a sonagram of the duetting call of *Gymnomyza viridis brunneirostris*, the Giant Forest Honeyeater of Viti Levu, Fiji (cf. Diamond 1972). While calling, this bird bends forward, as did *G. samoensis*, with the tail raised and fanned (Blackburn 1971). *G. v. viridis*, on Taveuni, gives varied calls including "loud melodious whistling gurgles with rapid mellow notes" (Blackburn *op. cit.*). Delacour (1966) describes the voice of the third species of the genus, the Crow Honeyeater (*G. aubryana*) of New Caledonia, as "strong and melodious."

The second bird, observed at closer range, was seen at the highest point on the road to Tiavi Falls (over 600 m a.s.l.) on 25

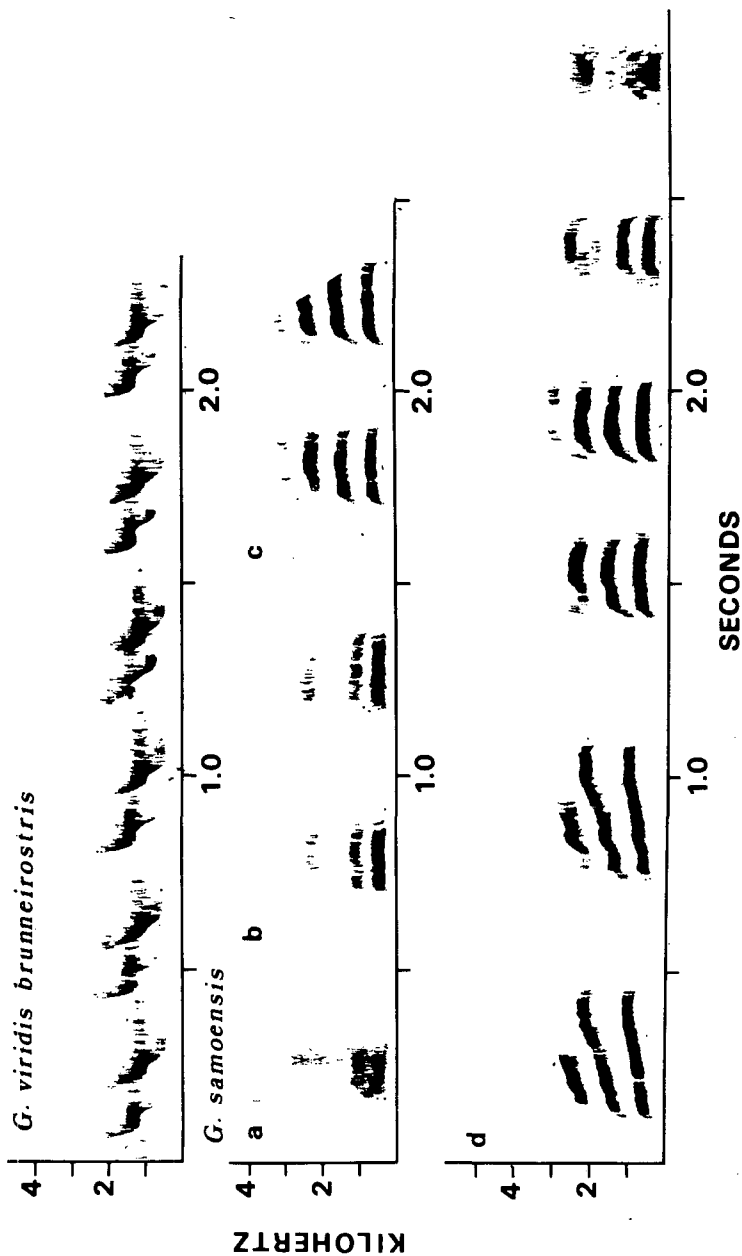


FIGURE 1 — Vocalisations of *Gymnomyza* spp. **Top:** Giant Forest Honeyeater (*Gymnomyza viridis brunneirostris*). Recorded on 19 June 1974 at Nailagosakelo Creek, southern Viti Levu, Fiji. Presumably a duet (cf. Diamond 1972); both birds not seen. **Middle and bottom:** Ma'o (*Gymnomyza samoensis*). Recorded on 25 June 1974 on Upolu, Western Samoa. Portions of a sequence of over 55 notes. Approximately 35 low, hoarse notes (a) were followed by eight clearer, higher-pitched phrases (b, c) leading to six loud yelps and subsiding again (last two yelps and four ensuing calls shown in (d)). All recordings made with a National Panasonic portable tape recorder.

June. It also kept to the interior of a tree, foraging in moss covering the limbs. Occasionally it hung upside down or completely circled a branch. Like the first bird, it kept up a continuous up-and-down tail-wagging. It called with a nasal, down-slurred *yaaw*. When it flew off, its flight was direct. In flight the bird reminded me of a miniature hornbill (Bucerotidae), with its elongate neck, rounded wings and long, spread tail.

Though both my observations were of single birds, Armstrong (1932) and Ashmole (1963; presumably quoting Armstrong) reported that the Ma'o associates in small parties. My observations may indicate a low population level for the species on Upolu. It seems unlikely that a bird with calls as loud and distinctive as has G.

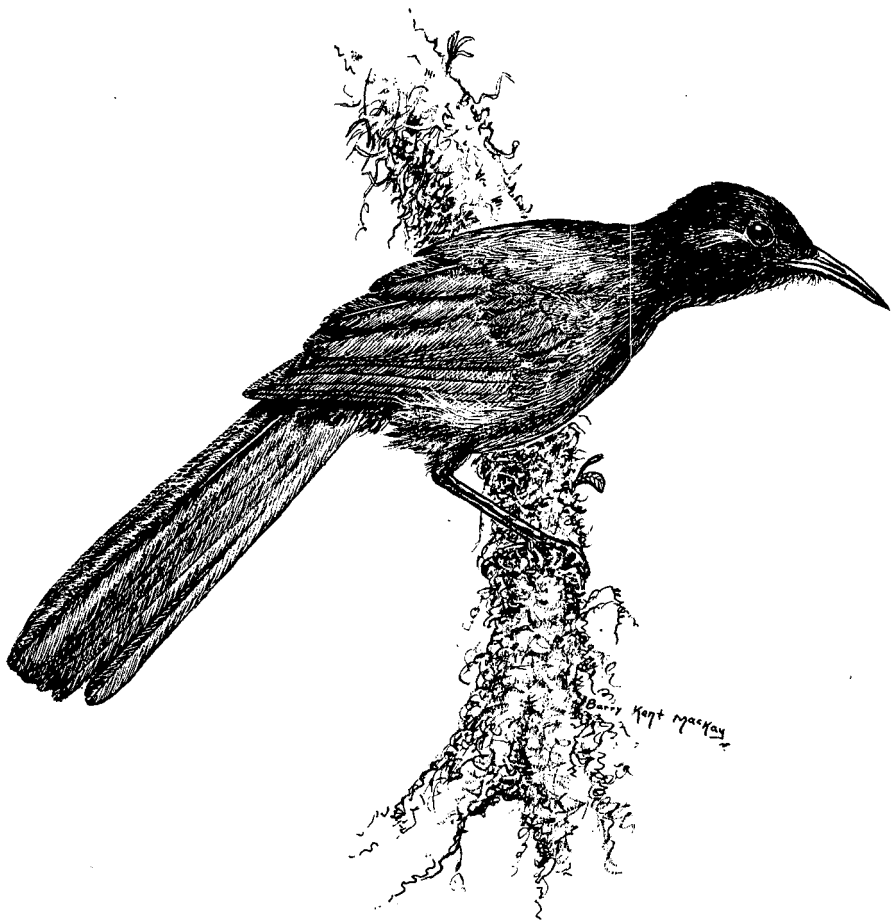


FIGURE 2 — Ma'o (*Gymnomyza samoensis*). Drawn by Barry Kent Mackay.

samoensis would be so rarely observed if it were not indeed rare, at least on Upolu and Tutuila.

The drawing of the Ma'ō in Figure 2 was prepared by B. K. Mackay from my rough field sketch and a specimen lent by the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto. The species has seldom been illustrated.

I am grateful to Peter Maddison and Andre Dhondt for their guidance in the field on Upolu. R. B. Payne provided access to sonagraph facilities, and Mark Orsen advised me in the preparation of Figure 1. The manuscript was read by R. W. Storer.

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SHORT NOTE

GOLDEN PLOVERS SETTLING ON ROOFS

At Pago Pago, American Samoa, on 14 November 1976, three Eastern Golden Plovers (*Pluvialis dominica fulva*) in worn plumage were noticed first on the end of the oil-wharf, then on cargo containers on board a ship, and later on the flat roof of the Rainmaker Hotel. Here two of the three were running this way and that in some sort of a chase.

All reefs near this harbour are covered at high tide; and if the nearby sports fields are thronged with people, there are no quiet grassy places where waders may roost.

When this was mentioned to Dr N. W. Cusa, an English naturalist and painter who has twice visited New Zealand, he was able to provide from his diaries two more instances of Golden Plovers frequenting roofs in the Pacific: (a) Pago Pago 13/12/71. "Two Golden Plovers on the roof of the harbour shed." (b) Honolulu 8/12/71. "Golden Plovers on many public lawns and even two on a low flattish roof on the outskirts of the town."

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