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Scientists tracing call of a bird find new species in Indonesia

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With its crimson head and cloak of glossy black feathers, the *Rote myzomela* is dressed in the colours of a flamenco dancer.

But it was not the diminutive bird's striking appearance that drew the attention of scientists from Singapore and the region. It was its call.

To the layman, the bird's call sounds like an unremarkable series of chirps. But for the researchers, it was a tell-tale sign that the Rote myzomela was a new species of honeyeater.

It was discovered on Pulau Rote, one of the southernmost islands of the Indonesian archipelago.

Ornithologist Philippe Verbelen, one of the scientists behind the discovery, said: "Most bird species have a distinctive song that is unique to that species."

The Rote myzomela was found on Pulau Rote and the scientists' findings were published in science journal Treubia last month. PHOTO: PHILIPPE VERBELEN

Mr Verbelen, from environmental conservation group Greenpeace, worked with Assistant Professor Frank Rheindt from the National University of Singapore (NUS) and researchers from the Indonesian Institute of Sciences on identifying the bird.

Their findings were published last month in the science journal Treubia.

Although it was only recently confirmed to be a new species, the bird was spotted by Australian ornithologist Ron Johnstone in the 1990s.

It was not clear then whether it was genetically different from other birds within the same family.

The newly discovered Rote myzomela is closely related to more than 30 species of small, brightly-coloured honeyeaters, such as the Sumba myzomela, found in Indonesia's Pulau Sumba; and the *Myzomela erythrocephala*, which can be found in places such as Australia.

Honeyeaters are a group of birds that feed mainly on nectar or insects.

But when Mr Verbelen visited the island in 2009 and recorded their song and call, he realised that the trill of the Rote myzomela was significantly different compared with related birds in the neighbouring Indonesian islands and in Australia.

He collected more sound recordings of the birds on subsequent trips and began to suspect that the Rote myzomela was likely to be a new species.

While it has a call that comprises a series of chirps in the same pitch, its relative, the Sumba myzomela, had a more undulating warble.

The Rote myzomela was confirmed as a new species by researchers from NUS and the Indonesian Institute of Sciences, who went to Rote Island in December 2015.

Other than making acoustic analyses of the birds' calls, the scientists also noted differences in the size and plumage of the Rote myzomela compared with other birds in the same family.

The new honeyeater species is likely to be found only on Rote Island and nowhere else in the world.

But the scientists noted that its habitat faces the threat of deforestation, as with many of Indonesia's forests.

To promote the conservation of its habitat, they gave the bird the scientific name *Myzomela irianawidodoae*, after Indonesian First Lady Iriana Widodo. The paper noted that this was done to recognise "her interest in Indonesia's bird life and her valuable stewardship and advocacy for Indonesia's natural environments".

Added Mr Verbelen: "The fact that this new bird was named after Indonesia's First Lady may surely help generate more attention to the needs for forest conservation on Rote Island."

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