

Tim Laman

A ten-year project to photograph all 39 species of the fabled birds of paradise earned American wildlife photojournalist **Tim Laman** the Portfolio Award in the 2014 Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition. He tells Wild Planet why he did it and why he will continue to photograph these extraordinary birds...

Interview by Keith Wilson



Heart-stopping show

The 16th and 17th Century illustrators of birds of paradise used dead specimens for reference and could never have imagined the choreography of the endangered red bird of paradise. Perched upright, the male dangles his two middle tail feathers alongside his body in a gentle corkscrew shape and flicks them from side to side. Only when he tilts forwards do the ribbons fall gracefully to form a heart-shaped frame for his full quivering display. To capture the pose, Tim built a tiny hide at the top of a 50m tree on Batanta Island, West Papua, opposite the male's display tree. Every morning he would climb the tree in the dark, ready for the male's romantic moves to begin at sunrise.

Canon EOS-1D Mk II, EF 400mm f/4, 1/750sec at f/4, ISO 400, hide

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The King of Saxony bird of paradise would call all day from high in the canopy. Only occasionally would it descend to a particular vine to display, and then only for a few seconds. Its small display arena was on the southwestern slopes of Mount Hagen, in Papua New Guinea, and it took a while to find a viewpoint where Tim could isolate him against a suitable background of vegetation. The male's head-wire feathers are twice the length of his body and usually lie down his back, but during the display they are flicked forward over his head, at the same time as white tabs are suddenly revealed along their midribs. The bird then pumps his body up and down to create the eye-catching effect of head-wire feathers waving like gleaming banners against the darker understory vegetation.

Canon EOS-1D Mk II, EF 600mm f/4, 1/180 sec at f/5.6, ISO 400, hide

“We knew that if we could put enough time in we’d be able to go find them all, which no-one had ever done before”

What makes birds of paradise difficult to photograph? Is it the accessibility?

Certainly the accessibility for so many of them. Some of them are fairly accessible, but New Guinea is a rugged mountainous place, the second largest island in the world, and many of these species are only found in certain mountain ranges, so I ended up going to 51 different field sites to try and find and photograph these birds.

Is this both sides of New Guinea, the Indonesian side and Papua New Guinea?

Both sides. In Papua New Guinea some of the smaller islands have endemic species and then the Indonesian side as well. Also Australia, there are two endemics in Australia in the Cape York area and in southern Queensland. New Guinea is not the easiest place to work in. Some trips involved flying in by bush plane to some remote airstrip, working with the local villagers to go up into the mountains to set up camp and then go out and look for the birds. After I did the initial story for National Geographic, which was published in 2007 with about 15 species, that was when I realized, I think I know how to do this. I'm working with this great ornithologist, Edwin Scholes, and we both realized we have this chance to document these birds, not only for science but for popular media to tell the story of this incredible family of birds. We knew that if we could put enough time in we'd be able to find them all, which no-one had ever done before.

How long have you been working for National Geographic?

I did my first story back in 1997 so I've spent 17 years working with National Geographic. I'm a biologist by background and my first connection with the society was as a research grantee for my PhD work, which I did in the rainforest of Borneo, climbing trees and studying strangler figs.

Why Birds of Paradise? When did you first encounter birds of paradise?

I first got interested in birds of paradise from reading Alfred Russel Wallace's famous book, *The Malay Archipelago*, so I went to Borneo because he talks about his travels to Borneo and he then went further east to New Guinea where birds of paradise are found. So I first read about his amazing observations on birds of paradise and wanted to go see them. I went on a bird watching trip to eastern Indonesia in 1990, when I was a graduate student, and saw a couple of species. I thought I've got to find a way to come back and work on these birds some day. It took many years and eventually I

pitched this story to National Geographic and in 2004 I started this project, but first as a magazine assignment. It wasn't to try and photograph all the species, more an overview with some of the more charismatic species.

Am I right in assuming the last one of the 39 species was the hardest to get?

Well, only in as much I had to chase that one down because it was the last one! I actually worked on some of the hardest ones in the middle of the project to make sure I could get them.

For this category of Wildlife Photographer of the Year, how did you distil 39 species down to ten images, from which the judges chose the final six? It must have been difficult.

Yes, but I'd gone through a lot of stages of editing of the pictures at this point. After the first article, they said you've got another 23, let's do another story, so in 2012 I published a second story in National Geographic that had a spread of all 39 species. So we had already pulled out our favourites. I tried to choose the most artistic images that had something in them besides a pure documentary shot of the bird. Out of the 39, there are some where all I have is just a good documentary-style record shot of that species. The images that stood out were those where the background is quite clean, which is really hard to do in the forest! I tried to pick a combination of tighter shots and a couple of wider shots to show the birds in their environment.

Which is your favourite photograph?

The image from the portfolio called *Sunrise performance* I dreamed about for years, about finding a spot where I could get the camera with a wideangle lens that close to the bird at the top of the canopy. So when I found that spot and the birds were displaying on this open branch right on top of the canopy, I thought this is it, this could work. I spent a couple of weeks there using a tiny GoPro camera up there to see if it would work and they still came. Then I upgraded to an SLR wrapped in leaves with just the lens sticking out.

Are they particularly shy birds, or are some are more used to human presence than others?

There are some living near villages where you can stand under a tree and they will fly above you and display. The Raggiana bird of paradise in particular is quite common in villages and gets used to people, but most of the birds I shot with hidden cameras from well-hidden blinds. They do tend to be very shy so I was always working from blinds with just a couple of exceptions.

Spellbinder

Having whistled his invitation to a female to take her seat, a magnificent riflebird launches into a bewitching performance. He flings his neck back to reveal a breast shield of electric blue that shimmers as it catches the light. Then whipping his head from side to side, he hops up and down on the branch to exaggerate the effect and cracks the air by whirring his wings like sharply flicked fans. There wasn't enough light to freeze the motion, and Tim didn't want to use flash. Instead, he used a relatively slow shutter speed to blur the image. Once a male magnificent riflebird has secured a female's consent, he will drape his wings over her and they will mate under his velvet-black cape.

Canon EOS 5D Mk II, EF 600mm f/4, 1/15 sec at f/4, ISO 1250, hide

Were there favoured times of day?

Most of the birds of paradise are displaying at dawn. They're not hanging out all day. They have preferred display spots. Some of them even display at 4am, just before it gets light, which makes it very difficult. Some species display on the ground and may come back during the day. Most of it is early morning, so I'd be going out in the dark, getting into my blind, waiting for the light and the birds to show up. Some of them would come back in the afternoon so I'd get an afternoon session as well.

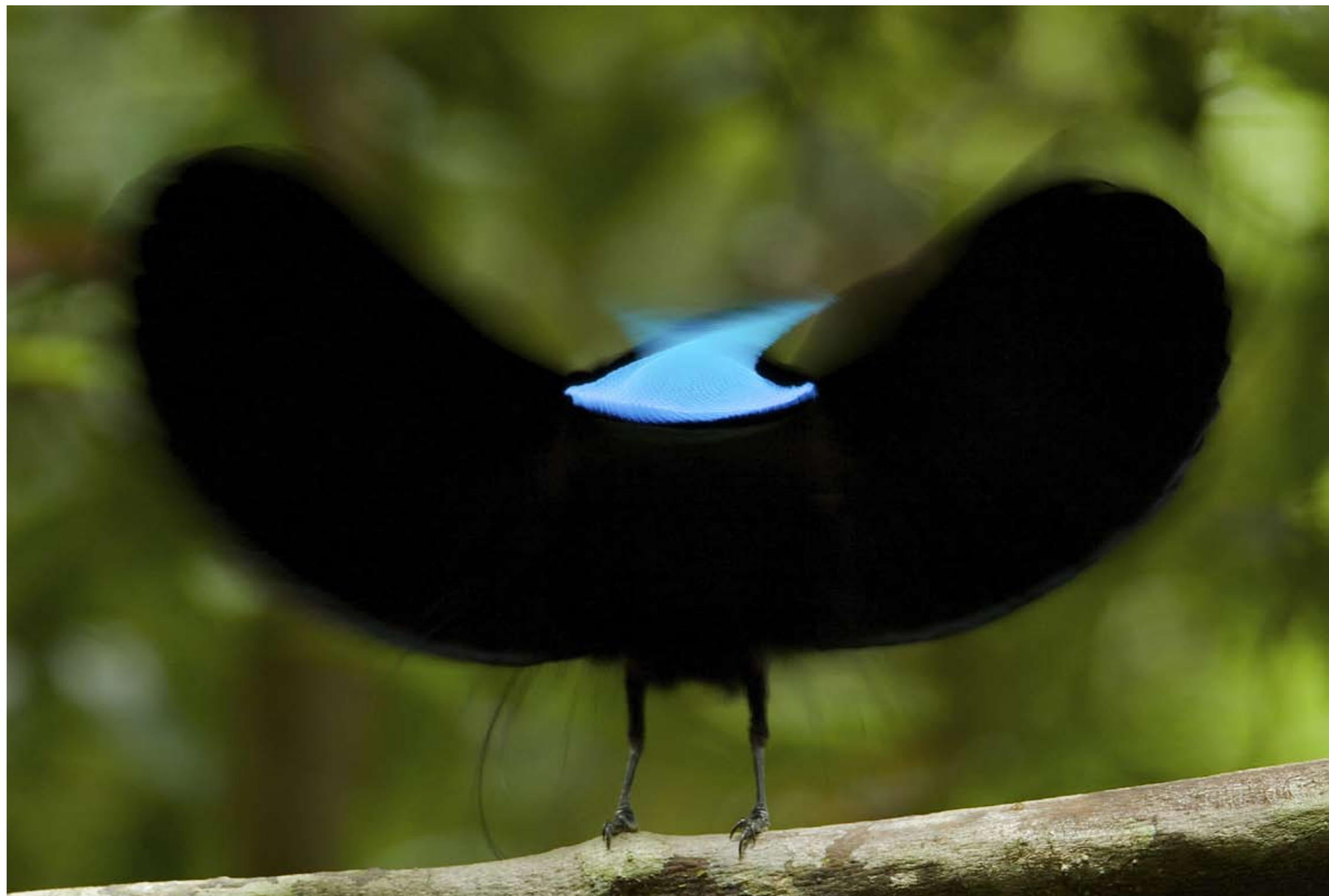
Which of the species is the rarest, the most endangered?

Well, the good thing about birds of paradise in terms of their conservation status is that New Guinea still has quite a lot of forest. Most of it generally is still intact, so of the 39 species, there are only three that are officially listed on the IUCN red list as endangered. And those are species that have very small ranges. One of them, the blue bird of paradise is at an elevation that is most inhabited by people, it's an area where there is a lot of forest clearing and gardens. It inhabits the same kind of area where villages cause a lot of disturbance, and have done for

thousands of years. It's really shrunk in its population, but most of them are still in pretty good shape.

The feathers of these birds are very important to many of the tribes of New Guinea. Are they the best conservationists or are they part of the problem?

Well it's very different on the Indonesian side of New Guinea and on the Papua New Guinea side. On the Papua New Guinea side the traditional land rights are recognized by the government, so these villagers own their own land, they own their own forest, they really value





Sunrise performance

Birds of paradise spend most of their time in the dense rainforest, so images usually have to be taken with telephoto lenses. But Tim wanted to show a bird performing against the backdrop of the rainforest, which meant a treetop vista and a wideangle lens. In the rainforest of Wokam Island, Indonesia, he found a display tree overlooking the forest where several greater birds of paradise were performing. Climbing into the canopy of a neighbouring tree, he built a leaf-covered hide from where he could watch the action. Then before dawn, he climbed the display tree, mounted his camera (camouflaged with leaves and with a laptop lead strung over to the hide tree), and focused on where a male was likely to display. From his hide he could control the camera from his laptop. As the male paused in his performance, tail and wings fluffed and fanned, Tim managed to create what would be his most treasured picture of the 10-year project.

Canon EOS 7D, EF 10–22mm f/3.5–4.5, 1/125sec at f/8, ISO 400, remote system

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The pole dancer

In the swamp rainforest, a male 12-wired bird of paradise poses at first light on his customary display pole and starts his performance. Calling loudly, he reveals the emerald-green inside of his beak, and flares his breast shield. The lack of mammal predators in New Guinea means that displaying is relatively safe for birds of paradise, even for the most trussed up individuals and those displaying on the ground. Historically, the main risk has been humans hunting them for their plumes. Today, the greatest threat is habitat loss: with the forests of Borneo and Sumatra dwindling, loggers are setting their sights on the forests of New Guinea.

Canon EOS 5D Mk II, EF 400mm f/4, 1/45sec at f/4, ISO 1000, hide



Tim Laman's pioneering research into Borneo's rainforest canopy led to a PhD from Harvard University and the beginning of a working relationship with National Geographic, resulting in 21 feature stories. As well as numerous awards in Wildlife Photographer of the Year, Tim was honoured in 2009 with the Outstanding Nature Photographer Award from the North American Nature Photography Association.

● <http://www.timlaman.com>

● *Tim's winning portfolio is part of the Wildlife Photographer of the Year 2014 exhibition at the Natural History Museum, London, until August 30, 2015, and touring worldwide.*

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it, so it's quite hard for a logging company to come in and persuade them to give up their forest because they know they're not going to get another one. So there are quite a lot of examples of villagers looking after their own land and the birds living there. The harvesting of the birds for plumes, it affects them obviously, but they are only taking the adult males, so a King of Saxony bird of paradise, for example, is a popular one, but males aren't getting those plumes until they're six-years-old, but they're sexually mature before then. So even if all the males with plumes were shot in one year, the females would still be desperate to mate so they'd go find the younger males that aren't even in full plumage, and they'd still be able to lay eggs. Because of the breeding system, males don't contribute to

the raising of the young at all. So it doesn't take that many males to keep the population going. That's why birds of paradise have survived hundreds of years of hunting for these plumes without becoming extinct.

What are the biggest threats today facing birds of paradise?

The biggest threat is habitat loss as the human population expands and logging and oil palm comes into New Guinea, especially on the Indonesian side where the government basically controls the land and doesn't recognize the traditional land rights to the extent that they do in Papua New Guinea. So the Indonesian government is more likely to grant a huge oil

palm concession to an area of lowland forest and ask the people to move their village and then wipe out a huge habitat to a 12-wire bird of paradise. That's the biggest threat long term.

Now you have photographed all 39 species, are birds of paradise going to feature in your future work?

They definitely are. I am also doing other projects. Although I captured some great behavioural shots of many of the species, I also saw so much that I wasn't able to capture or film. I'm doing more cinematography on birds of paradise now, so there's much to do and so many cool stories to tell. Also, on the research side with Ed Scholes,

my ornithological collaborator, we have made so many observations of their displays, we've got a lot of research questions and filmmaking objectives to work on.

So you have really struck the balance now between scientific research and wildlife photography?

Yes, I really feel this is the ideal project for that because there are still so many research questions about birds of paradise that we can work on while we go on expedition to New Guinea to do photography and filmmaking. At the same time we can be collecting data on these species, so for me that's the perfect combination to make a contribution to science and create some stunning imagery.



The sensitive mover

Once the male 12-wired bird of paradise has performed his first display well enough to persuade a female to approach, he switches to a new tactic. He turns his back on her, twists the lower part of his body from left to right and brushes her face repeatedly with his wire plumes. It's hard to see this gesture in real time, but Tim managed to freeze the moment of contact, showing how displays may comprise touch as well as colour, sound and movement. If the male passes this part of the test, she stays, and he starts tapping her beak with his. Only then does she mate with him.

Canon EOS-1D Mk IV, EF 600mm f/4, 1/180sec at f/5.6, ISO 1600, hide

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