

Reports of Living Pterosaurs in the Southwest Pacific

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Abstract

Standard models of evolution assert that all species of dinosaurs and pterosaurs became extinct long ago and that their fossils are evidence for unlimited common ancestry, the extinction of the vast majority of species opening the way for those more fit to survive. Although all species of pterosaurs could have been destroyed by the Flood and post-Flood changes, the young-earth view holds out the possibility of extant pterosaurs. Investigations of reports of creatures whose descriptions suggest Rhamphorhynchoid pterosaurs in remote areas of Papua New Guinea were carried out between 1994 and 2007. Two expeditions to Umboi Island in 2004 resulted in formal interviews with villagers, and an expedition deep into the interior of the mainland in 2006 resulted in indirect video evidence and a sighting by two native explorers. Although no direct proof has been presented, the indirect evidence is substantial and intriguing.

Introduction

Pterosaur fossils were first discovered in Germany in 1784. By Darwin's time, pterosaurs were all assumed to be extinct. Paleontological expeditions gathered evidence of the deep past, since evolution negated the possibility of extant pterosaurs. That assumption (along with the belief that natural history must be interpreted by scientific naturalism) caused old human records of "dragons" to be relegated to the status of myth

(Woetzel, 2006a). But what if those accounts contained a germ of truth? In that case, accounts of flying dragons may come from actual sightings of pterosaurs, and some species might have survived into the present.

The search for living pterosaurs is cryptozoological. Cryptozoology is the study of "hidden" or "unclassified" zoological species or possible species, especially in the early discovery stages. A number of expeditions in recent years

have collected and analyzed eyewitness testimony, primarily in Papua New Guinea (PNG) (Figure 1). These accounts center on a strange creature the natives of Umboi Island (Figure 2) call a "ropen." In addition to interviews (from 1994 through 2004) with PNG natives, interviews with five Western eyewitnesses were conducted (from 2004 through 2007) by e-mail, telephone, mail, and in person.

Following publication of the book *Searching for Ropens* in mid-2006, Paul Nation's late-2006 expedition resulted in video evidence of what is believed to be bioluminescence of an unidentified flying creature. This interested the producers of *Destination Truth* on

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Figure 1. Map of Papua New Guinea. Tawa Village = 1; Salamaua = 2; Finschhafen = 3; Umboi Island = 4; New Britain = 5; Bougainville Island = 6; Manus Island = 7.

the Sci-Fi Channel enough that they mounted a video expedition in early 2007 that recorded another instance of this unidentified light. Thanks to the broadcast of that episode in mid-2007, the public has been exposed to the possibility of living pterosaurs.

A body of indirect evidence has accumulated that suggests that extant pterosaurs exist in the southwest Pacific area. This paper will present and evaluate that evidence and address some of the skepticism of the possibility of extant pterosaurs, suggesting that this skepticism tends to rest on an evolutionary worldview.

Eyewitness Accounts

Eyewitness testimonies can be divided into two categories: those describing a flying light and those describing a creature. Four of the eyewitnesses describe both a glow and a shape or features, connecting the two types of description.

Most ropen sightings are of a bright but brief glow that moves approximately horizontally at about 330 ft (100

m) above ground level, often against a mountain background. Based on interviews from the 2004 expeditions (Tables I and II), an estimated several hundred Umboi Islanders have seen this light. This is not conclusive of living pterosaurs but is strong evidence of an unknown flying creature, probably displaying bioluminescence. Of the nine American expeditions (1994–2007), six resulted in at least one sighting of the light.

While both ropen lights and meteors are fast-moving flashes of lights in the sky, several characteristics distinguish them (Whitcomb, 2007). For example, Abram of Opai Village, Umboi Island, described a ropen light that flew down to a reef and stayed at or near the surface of the sea before flying back toward Mount Bel (Whitcomb interview) (Figure 2). Another villager provided an independent account of a similar incident (Guessman-Woetzel interview) on Northern Umboi. Woetzel (2006a) sighted a large, glowing object at least 20% the apparent size of a full moon. It lacked a meteor trail and was moving



Figure 2. Map of Umboi Island. Sightings over reefs = A, B, C, D. Major peaks: Mt. Tolo (Lake Pung) = 1; Mt. Barik = 2; Mt. Sual = 3; Mt. Bel = 4. Villages: Tarawe = 5; Gomlongon (near Opai) = 6; Lab Lab = 7; Kampalap = 8

toward Lake Pung, where other eyewitnesses had described a large, flying, featherless, long-tailed creature years earlier. Analysis of 2004-expedition records suggest that many suspected ropen lights move away from Mount Bel early at night but toward it late at night.

Daylight sightings, when eyewitnesses can better discern shape and features (Figures 3 and 4), are rare but have been documented. Eyewitnesses include an American soldier and an Australian who works at a medical university in China. An Australian couple saw a creature early at night, but ground lighting from a nearby stadium illuminated some detail. Further testimony has been collected from three natives who made daylight sightings at a crater lake, and from another native, Jonah Jim, who made a close-up night sighting just south of that lake (Figure 5).

Jonah Jim and Jonathan Ragu, both of Umboi, made separate sightings in different areas of Umboi. However, both described a glowing, flying creature. When shown many illustrated silhouettes of birds, bats, and pterosaurs,

Table I. Investigation Results.

Source	Ref	Early investigations by missionary Jim Blume (70+ interviews)
native(s)	...	West of Finschhafen, man was attacked, carried into the air, dropped, and killed
native(s)	...	In some areas, wingspans are 20 ft; on Manus Island, wingspans are 3–4 ft
native(s)	...	bat-like wings and tails with flanges and a structure on head; they glow at night

Source	Ref	1994, 1996, and 2001 expeditions
Baugh, Carl	...	Impression in sand correlates with accounts: ropens sometimes sleep on beaches
Blume, Jim	16	Sighting supports native accounts: glowing creatures much larger than fireflies
Eunice	11	The ropen can be attracted to a funeral gathering, but noise can keep it away
hunters (two)	...	Ropen can hold itself upright while on a tree trunk, like a man climbing a coconut tree
Koro, Gideon	12	At least one ropen is much larger than any bat; it can fly in daylight
man, young	...	Creatures (like magazine picture of pterosaur) bigger than a man; they eat fish
native	...	Large skinny flying creature (glowing) robbed a human grave
native	...	Man died after waking a flying creature on the beach of a small island
tradition	...	The ropen has been compared to a human; see “hunters (two)” above
tradition	...	Ropens were robbing human graves in the past; see Michael, below
tradition	...	Native says that ropen lives on mountain but comes down to hunt game
tradition	...	Ropen lives in a cave on Mount Bel
tradition	...	“Glikioik” is size of cassowary but flies; leaves burn marks on trees
tradition	...	Glikioiks arrive near Bitoi Village seasonally or on occasion
uncle of victim	9	Young boy was attacked by a glikioik and died before arriving at a clinic
woman, young	...	Flights are not confined to central & western Umboi: One flew over Lab Lab (east)

both chose the *Sordes Pilosus*, a Rhamphorhynchoid pterosaur as best fitting what they had seen (Woetzel-Guessman expedition). Baptist minister Jacob Kepas also described a glowing, flying creature. Some witnesses have compared the glow of ropens to the red glow of burning embers.

Expeditions

In 1994, Carl Baugh, Jim Blume, and Paul Nation interviewed villagers on Umboi Island, PNG (Tables I and III). They reported a glowing, nocturnal flying creature that they called “ropen.” Kuban (2007) suggests that rather than “ropen” being a pterosaur, it is likely a

creature such as a bat. However, villagers have another term for the flying fox fruit bat—“byung” (Whitcomb, 2007). In 1996, Baugh and Blume searched for the creatures in the Manus Island area (Figure 1). These two expeditions resulted in two indistinct sightings of what may have been ropens. In 2002, Nation returned to Umboi but obtained no further evidence.

After reviewing videotapes from these expeditions, I traveled, in late 2004, to south-central Umboi Island (Figure 2) to interview villagers there. A few days after my return, David Woetzel and Garth Guessman traveled to north-central Umboi. Their interviews provided information on the tail movement of

the ropen (Woetzel, 2006a; Wellnhofer, 1991) (Figure 6) and one description that suggests a structure at the end of the tail (Whitcomb, 2007) similar to that found on fossil Rhamphorhynchoids. Information also was obtained about what we believe is bioluminescence emitted by the creature. Both 2004 expeditions included interviews designed to avoid leading the witnesses and to elicit answers revealing sighting experience rather than interviewer bias. Witness accounts provided data about the nocturnal sightings and flight headings of the creatures. There were two separate distant sightings of “ropen” lights, one by Woetzel and one by my interpreter, Luke Kenda; both sightings

Table I. Investigation Results (continued).

Source	Ref	2002 and both 2004 expeditions
Amboi, Robin	31	When it flies close, ropen light can terrify villagers; it's like a "big torch"
Batsima	22	Ropen was unafraid of landing on a tree near Tarawe Village; light was very bright
fisherman	...	Ropen flies to a reef near Kampalap (NE Umboi) once a month; see Gima, W.
Gibson	...	Ropen never glows longer than 5–6 seconds at a time (north coast) see Gima, W.
Gibson	...	A shooting star is much dimmer than ropen and much higher in the sky; see Woetzel
Gima, W.	36	Bright light over a reef lasted about five seconds (Northern Umboi Island); see Moke
Jim, Jonah	20	The ropen may be similar to a <i>Sordes Pilosus</i> (but ropen is large); see Ragu, J.
Kepas, Jacob	5	"Seklo-bali" in Wau area is like the ropen of Umboi: it glows while it flies
Koro, Gideon	12	Tail length is 7 m; mouth "like a crocodile"; color, brown; can fly in daylight; see Mesa
man, old	18	At a beach, flew fast with feet folded under a straight tail; bright light at end of tail
man, old	18	May be similar to a <i>Dimorphodon</i> but the ropen has a horn on its head
Mesa-Wesley	13–14	Has a long tail with a "diamond" — Seven boys, terrified, ran home (from Lake Pung)
Michael (Opai)	2	Glowing ropen took a human body (from a grave in Gomlongon) to Mount Bel
Moke, D.	33	Bright light over a reef lasted about five seconds (SW of Umboi); see Gibson
Moke, D.	33	Fish are attracted to light at night (Umboi fishermen use waterproof flashlight)
native	...	Fishermen tried (failed) to catch a ropen *sleeping on a beach; *see Baugh (above)
native	...	Ropen used to rob human graves but does not do this any more
Ragu, J.	34	At least one glowing ropen may fly between Umboi and Tolokiwa (islands)
Ragu, J.		The ropen may be similar to a <i>Sordes Pilosus</i> (but ropen is large); see Jim, Jonah
tradition	...	Ropen tail stiff except where it connects to body (northern Umboi Island)
various	var	Ropen lights regularly fly over northern, central, and southern Umboi Island
Woetzel, D.		Ropen differs from a meteor: no tail, angular size of 20%-25% of a full moon
Woetzel, D.	...	Large, empty clam shells correlate with a native account: the ropen eats clams

Source	Ref	2006 and both 2007 expeditions
native	...	Creature (indava?) in Tawa area was seen to be as big as an "airplane"
native	...	Indavas used to steal animals or children from Tawa (until people made noise)
Joseph+	47	Winged creature sleeping on cliff may have been an indava videotaped by Nation
Nation	44	"indava" lights seen in the Tawa village area of mainland PNG
Nation	45	Paul Nation videotaped two indava lights that were on a nearby ridge
Nation	49	True indava lights differ from distant car headlights
native	48	Light videotaped by Destination Truth was said to be the pterosaur-like creature

were consistent with ropen-light descriptions: nearly horizontal movement at low elevations (Table II).

Late in 2006, Nation witnessed a number of lights near Tawa Village (Whitcomb, 2007) in a remote moun-

tainous area of the mainland interior, where natives call the lights "indava" (Table III). He videotaped two of the

Table II. Sighting Descriptions.

Ref.	Location	Year	Eyewitness	Description	Distance	Map-1	Map-2
1	Finschhafen	1944	Hodgkinson	giant, long beak & tail, head append.	50 meters	3	
2	Umboi	1949	Michael	glowing creature attacked a grave	unknown	4	6
3	Bougainville	1971	Hennessy	long beak, long tail, head appendage	75 meters	6	
4	Umboi	1972	Cottingham	gov't official sees light fly near Lab Lab	unknown	4	7
5	Wau area	~1984	Kepas	“seklo-bali” glowing as it flew	unknown	~1	
6	Umboi	1985	old woman	it flew from mountains towards beach	unknown	4	~A
7	Umboi	unkwn	2 hunters	upright, it holds onto a tree trunk	unknown	4	
8	Umboi	unkwn	young man	pterosaur appearance; they eat fish	unknown	4	
9	Bitoi Valley	unkwn	old man	child killed by flying creature	unknown	~1	
10	Umboi	1992	John Lapu	flying light over Gomlongon area	unknown	4	6
11	Umboi	1993	Eunice	creature flew with glowing red tail	unknown	4	~B
12	Umboi	1994	Gideon K	giant ropen over Lake Pung; long tail	unknown	4	1
13	Umboi	1994	Wesley K	ropen, “too big,” had diamond on tail	unknown	4	1
14	Umboi	1994	Mesa A	ropen had a “diamond” on its tail	unknown	4	1
15	Umboi	1997	Jefron A	light flew from Bel toward Lake Pung	unknown	4	4
16	Manus	1996	Blume	0.5-meter-tall glowing figure	unknown	7	
17	Perth, Austr	1997	couple	giant, leathery-skinned, long tail	200 meters		
18	Umboi	unkwn	old man	end of tail was glowing as it flew	unknown	4	
19	Umboi	2001	Dianne A	light flew from Tarawe toward Bel	unknown	4	5
20	Umboi	2001	Jonah Jim	long tail glowing blue as it flew	200 meters	4	1
21	Umboi	2002	Kau+Anton	flew from Mt Bel toward the beach	unknown	4	4
22	Umboi	2002	Batsima	glowing ropen landed on a tree	unknown	4	~5
23	Umboi	2002	Mark Kau	ropen light flew from beach to Mt Bel	unknown	4	~6
24	Umboi	2002	Mark Kau	as ropen flew, tail was glowing red	unknown	4	
25	Umboi	2002	Mark Kau	ropen light flew from Mt Bel to beach	unknown	4	~6
26	Umboi	unkwn	Jos. Buko	white light flew toward the beach	unknown	4	~6

lights, and a physicist, Cliff Paiva, analyzed his footage, confirming that the images were not from a car, campfire, meteor, or photographic hoax (Paiva and Slusher, 2007). Two of Nation’s native assistants, Pastor Jacob Kepas and Joseph, sighted a large winged creature in the area during the day; it appeared to be sleeping.

Early in 2007, the first noncreationist ropen expedition team—the television production, *Destination Truth*, led by

Josh Gates—videotaped a light similar to that videotaped by Nation. Two forensic experts could not explain the evidence.

Interview Methods

A language barrier forced us to often rely on interpreters and on the limited English skills of many eyewitnesses, although my limited skill in *Tok Pisin* was of some use. But some eyewitnesses from Umboi Island were more proficient

in English, and the cultural gap was less than it would have been if we had gone to an island other than Umboi, where there are several small schools.

Guessman and Woetzel prepared and administered formal interview procedures with a two-page questionnaire and a sketch page of 34 silhouettes of bats, birds, and pterosaurs, although the formal process was not used for all eyewitnesses. My interviews were less formal, relying on opportunities that

Table II. Sighting Descriptions (continued).

Ref.	Location	Year	Eyewitness	Description	Distance	Map-1	Map-2
27	Umboi	2003	Kau+Anton	it flew from beach toward Bel	unknown	4	~6
28	Umboi	2003	Abram	it flew from beach glowing red+white	unknown	4	5
29	Umboi	2003	Abram	light flew down to reef, as if fishing	1.5 km	4	A
30	Umboi	2003	Venice C	light over Gomlongon flew to beach	unknown	4	6
31	Umboi	2003	R Ambois	light over Arot Village scared them	unknown	4	~3
32	Umboi	2003	Zacharia	Owanga villagers saw it flying south	unknown	4	~5
33	Umboi	2004	Moke	light above reef (overhead)	unknown	4	A
34	Umboi	2004	Ragu	creature glowing as it flew	unknown	4	B
35	Umboi	2004	Pat. Sual	flies regularly: mountain to mountain	distant	4	~3
36	Umboi	2004	Gima	light above reef	unknown	4	C
37	Umboi	2004	Leonard	it flies over Opai Village once/month	unknown	4	~6
38	Umboi	2004	John Anton	light flies from Mt Bel toward beach	unknown	4	~6
39	Umboi	2004	Kenda-Kau	Large, glowing flying object	9 km	4	4
40	Umboi	2004	R Ambois	flew from Mt Bel to Mt Sual	unknown	4	4,3
41	Umboi	2004	R Ambois	flew from Mt Sual to Mt Tolo	unknown	4	3,1
42	Umboi	2004	D Nolo	skinny creature, glowing as it flew	unknown	4	~1
43	Umboi	2004	Woetzel	Large, glowing flying object	3 km	4	1
44	Tawa area	2006	Nation	several flying "indava" lights	distant	1	
45	Tawa Village	2006	Nation	two lights on a ridge (videotaped)	1.2 km	1	
46	Tawa area	2006	Kepas	winged creature sleeping on a cliff	unknown	1	
47	Tawa area	2006	Joseph	winged creature sleeping on a cliff	unknown	1	
48	Salamaua	2007	Gates	Large, glowing flying object	unknown	2	
49	Tawa area	2007	Nation	Large, glowing flying objects	unknown	1	

Table III. Expeditions.

Expedition	Key Participants	Location	Principal Results
1994	Baugh, Blume, Nation	Umboi Island	interviewed eyewitnesses
1996	Baugh, Blume	Manus Island	saw glowing forms
2001	M. S. (anonymous)	Bitoi Village	interviewed eyewitnesses
2002	Nation & son	Umboi Island	interviewed eyewitnesses
2004-W-K	Whitcomb, Kenda	Umboi Island	interviews; saw glowing form
2004-W-G	Woetzel, Guessman, Kepas	Umboi Island	interviews; saw glowing form
2006	Nation, Kepas, Joseph	Tawa Village	interviews; videotaped glowing forms
2007-JG	Josh Gates and associates	Salamaua	interviews; videotaped glowing form
2007-Nation	Nation	Tawa Village	saw glowing forms



Figure 3. Hodgkinson's choices of head sketches resulted in the composite on the left; Hennessy's, on the right. Choices were made on test sketches to determine characteristics such as beak sharpness and appendage length. The difference in appendage length ratio seems within the range of eyewitness error for these two sightings.



Figure 4. This wing-shape is from the Perth sighting; other details (length-to-wingspan ratio and head) are composited from details by Hennessy, Hodgkinson, and a few Umboi Island villagers.



Figure 5. The south side of Mount Tolo near Lake Pung and near where the flying light disappeared from Woetzel's view in 2004.



Figure 6. Typical Rhamphorhynchoid tail-vertebrae structure. This appears to be consistent with a tradition (north Umboi Island) about the ropen's tail movement. The interlocking structures prevent much movement except near the base, where the tail connects to the body.

arose with each eyewitness. For future work, I recommend beginning with this open-format questioning to take advantage of unique opportunities with eyewitnesses (the interviewer using a foreign language) and then following up promising leads with a questionnaire and sketch page (using interpreters).

Western Eyewitnesses

Several English-speaking Western eyewitnesses report sightings of possible pterosaurs. Freed from language and cultural barriers, communication is optimized in these situations, and greater detail can be gleaned from these witnesses.

Duane Hodgkinson

In 2004 I interviewed Duane Hodgkinson, of Montana, by e-mail, survey form, and telephone. He was then videotaped by Guessman in 2005. He and an army friend were in a jungle clearing west of Finschhafen (then New Guinea) in 1944 (Figure 1) when something "huge" took off into the air from the far side of the clearing. The creature ran to their left, taking six to ten steps to get airborne and ascended at an angle of about 30 degrees (similar to an airplane taking off). It then disappeared over the dense brush but soon returned and flew over the clearing, presenting a "perfect side view" of its features before again flying out of view. The wings never stopped flapping, at one to two seconds per flap, while it flew.

Hodgkinson recounted several morphological details. The girth of the body

at the chest was about 2 ft (0.6 m). He estimated the legs to be 3–4 ft (1–1.2 m) long. The top of the back was 5–6 ft (1.5–1.8 m) above the ground just before takeoff. Although he did not notice details of the tail, he estimated it was "at least" 10–15 ft (3–4.6 m) long. He compared the wingspan to a Piper Tri-Pacer airplane (~29 ft or 9 m). The length of the head, not counting the appendage, was about 3–4 ft (1–1.2 m), similar to the length of the neck. An appendage protruding from the head, above the neck, was about half that length, and both the head and appendage were parallel to the neck (Figure 3). During flight, the feet were tucked up to the body. Hodgkinson was unsure of other features. The color was dark but not black. He took no notice of any feathers or hair, and he remembered nothing about the eyes.

This sighting occurred at noon in a clearing with grass less than three feet in height. The weather was good, and there was no obstruction to Hodgkinson's view during the takeoff and during the return flight over the clearing. When the creature took off into the air, it was about "100 feet" (30 m) away from the men. When it returned to the clearing, it was flying about "50–100 feet" (15–30 m) high.

Brian Hennessy

In 2006, I interviewed Mr. Hennessy (a professional psychologist) by e-mail. On Bougainville Island, PNG, in 1971, he saw what he described as a "prehistoric" creature flying possibly about "50 m" (164 ft) above him. It was black or dark brown, with a "longish narrow tail"

and “no feathers in sight.” Its wingspan was “at least 2 m [6.6 ft], probably more...possibly much much more.... The head had no ‘normal’ beak. Rather there seemed to be (and this is difficult to describe) a kind of beak that was indistinguishable from the head, and the head seemed to continue this ‘point’ at the back of the head. There was a clear line running from the ‘beak’ to the back of the head where the ‘line’ continued to protrude.”

When asked if there “was anything coming out the back of the head—whether classified as a crest, appendage, horn, or comb,” he replied, “It was like a horn.” I asked about wing-flapping frequency, “how many seconds...for one cycle...up-and-down-flap,” and he replied, “Estimate every 2 seconds.” When asked about the tail, he answered, “As far as I can recall, straight.” I gave Hennessy a set of sketches, and his choices were remarkably similar to the results of my survey examination of Duane Hodgkinson (Figure 3).

Australian Couple

At about the time I was interviewing Hodgkinson in 2004, I found an old Internet forum posting in which an Australian lady was trying to persuade participants in a cryptozoology forum that she had seen a giant, living creature that looked like a pterosaur. I established e-mail communication with her and learned about her sighting in Perth, Australia in December of 1997. Her husband soon joined in my e-mail interview, but they prefer to remain anonymous.

The couple was walking together between two suburbs at about 10:00 p.m. when they first noticed the flying creature. As its gliding brought it closer, the couple was shocked, for it had a “lizard appearance” and a reported “size” between 30 and 50 ft (9–15 m). The lady declared, “It was definitely a living creature.... We would not have been able to see what it was if the ground lighting had not lit its underside.”

The lady admitted to me that her husband probably could give a better accounting of the sighting, for she was too shocked to take in details and her husband works in a scientific field and seems to have observed and remembered more. He reported, “Within a minute or so it had reached our position and was about 250 or 300 ft [76 to 91 m] above us and slightly inland. The area was [moderately] well lit...it seemed to be a light [reddish-tan] color. It did not appear to be covered with feathers but had a leathery texture.”

He continued, “Soon after it passed us, it flew over a more brightly lit sports area which highlighted even more the leathery appearance, also bringing more detail to view. The wings were the most [definite] leathery feature; they were shaped in an [triangular] arch, similar to a very [elongated] shark fin [Figure 4]. The body also still appeared leathery, though textured as though possibly covered with fine hair or small scales, the distance preventing any finer observation other than that it was [a] slightly different texture than the wings. The shape of the body was a streamlined torpedo shape, slightly broadest at the chest and tapering slightly back to the hip, then tapering more quickly after the hips to a moderately thin tail, which was slightly longer than the body. At the hips the legs appeared to be tucked in close to the body.... The head was close to the body, though whether from a short neck or from having its head drawn in in the manner of some long-necked waterfowl I cannot say.... The creature...was mostly gliding...some wing movement as in a hawk or other bird controlling its flight path, but did not flap as a sparrow or other small bird.... the wing span was greater than the length of the body proper, or a bit more than half the total length, the tail being slightly longer than the body. Size is of course hard to determine accurately at a distance, since even a small miscalculation in distance can magnify any error in the estimate. I, at

the time however estimated the size to be in excess of 30 ft, possibly as great as 50 ft [referring to wingspan]. My eyes told me it was nearer the greater of these; my rational mind wants me to believe the lesser, since either of these is astounding for a flying creature.”

Their answers to the survey form I had sent the couple showed some similarity to the Hodgkinson and Hennessy creatures, but there were differences in the wing shape, wingspan-to-total-length ratio, coloring, and possibly the relative neck length.

David Woetzel

Although Woetzel saw neither shape nor features during his ropen-light sighting on Umboi Island in 2004, his report is significant, for he was looking for the ropen and was prepared to take note of anything he saw. His description was distinctly unlike meteors or man-made lights. Significantly, the object disappeared behind the crater-mountain system of Lake Pung (Whitcomb, 2006), where other sightings have taken place, suggesting the ropen’s destination was that lake (Figure 5).

Paul Nation

The first American to bring back video evidence for the bioluminescence of the ropen was Paul Nation, who explored near Tawa Village in late 2006. He saw a number of flying lights on several nights and videotaped, for about fifteen seconds, two lights that were on a ridge where there were no roads, cars, or campfires. His early-2007 expedition was less productive but still resulted in sightings of the flying lights. Local villagers call the creature “indava.”

Native Eyewitnesses

Jacob Kepas

Few eyewitnesses have clearly sighted a ropen more than once. Jacob Kepas is an exception, with two sightings. He

is also the first nonlocal explorer to have seen a pterosaur-like form while assisting an organized ropen search. As a Baptist minister born in PNG but trained by missionary Jim Blume, he understands both native traditions and Western ideas about the creatures. He became actively involved in the investigations after assisting, as an interpreter, the Woetzel-Guessman Umboi Island expedition of 2004.

His first sighting was at night, when he was about twelve years old (Whitcomb, 2006) (Table II). Hearing the noise of the flying creature (known in his village as “seklo-bali”), he looked up and briefly saw the wings and tail; significantly, he also saw a glow from the creature. His second sighting came in daylight, in the Tawa Village area, late in 2006. It was at a distance that required binoculars, and Kepas reported that he saw what might have been the head of a giant indava partially covered by a wing; the creature appeared to be sleeping. The viewing angle was poor, but a local man named Joseph climbed to a higher vantage point and declared that it was the creature they sought. Unfortunately, their video recording failed to show what the two men saw through the binoculars, and Paul Nation was not present at that event.

Gideon Koro, Wesley Koro, and Mesa Agustín

In about 1994, at Lake Pung, Umboi, and in daylight, seven boys, aged about eleven to sixteen, saw what three of them (in 2004) told me was a ropen (Table II). Their testimonies were videotaped during an interview in the Awelkon Village area (Figures 7 and 8).

According to Gideon Koro, who speaks some English, a few minutes after they had arrived at the lake, “it came down.” I tried to ask about wingspan but at that point had to rely on an interpreter (using the Kovai language), and only later did I realize that he probably thought that I meant the length of *one* wing. In

either case, his answer is astonishing: “seven meetuh” (seven meters). When I asked about the tail length, he pondered, seeming to recall and estimate; then he said, “seven meetuh.”

Gideon was sure that the creature was a ropen. He hesitated before giving the color (probably searching for the English word): “brown.” When I asked about feathers, he at first appeared to be puzzled; his answer and mannerisms then seemed to me to reveal that he was surprised that I should ask that question: “There’s no feathers” (Figure 7). I then asked, “Was there just skin?” The Kovai word “byung” came up as did the English term “flying fox.” Gideon agreed that the skin was like that of a fruit bat.

When I asked about the back of the head (hoping for information on a head crest), another villager interpreted: Gideon had not seen the head clearly enough to answer that question. I asked about the mouth, and Gideon thought for a while before answering, “Its mouth like a crocodile.”

Soon thereafter I made three drawings in the dirt. I drew two similar versions of the creature’s head; one with crocodilian-like eye sockets and the other without the eyes at the top of the



Figure 7. Throughout Gideon’s videotaped 2004 interview, his facial expressions consistently communicated in harmony with his words. Here, he expresses puzzlement when asked about feathers. He then said, in English, “There’s no feathers.”

head. Gideon immediately chose the non-crocodilian head. I also started a drawing of a large head (with a long snout), which Gideon completed by drawing the body, wings, and tail (Whitcomb, 2007). His drawing suggested a tail length of about half the wingspan, or about the length of one wing.

The other two men interviewed were Wesley Koro and Mesa Agustín (Figure 8). They confirmed that they had been with Gideon and had also seen the ropen at Lake Pung. Both of these eyewitnesses mentioned a “diamond” on the tail, which may have been a structure similar to the tail flange of fossil Rhamphorhynchoids, but I failed to use the drawing-in-the-dirt method to confirm its morphology.

Jonah Jim

Within minutes of completing the interviews with Gideon, Wesley, and Mesa, while on the road back to Gomlongon Village, our expedition team met a local villager named Jonah Jim. I spent little time interviewing him, since I had to catch the next boat to the mainland. He sighted a ropen in 2001, near our interview site (Figure 5). He saw both a long tail and a glow from the ropen.



Figure 8. Like the other two Pung-sighting eyewitnesses interviewed in 2004, Mesa ran away after seeing the ropen in 1994. But, unlike the other two, he still acted fearful or anxious during the interview ten years later.

Only later did I realize the importance of his testimony: He had confirmed that the flying glow is a large, long-tailed flying creature.

Fortunately, a few weeks later Guessman and Woetzel interviewed Jonah Jim (Table I). Jonah Jim chose the *Sordes Pilosus* when given a choice between thirty-four silhouettes. He estimated the wingspan at 20–23 ft (6–7 m) and the tail at 8–10 ft (2.5–3 m). Unlike Gideon Koro, Jonah Jim clearly understood that “wingspan” referred to both wings. He also noted that only the tail was glowing.

Jonathan Ragu

In 2004, Jonathan Ragu and his daughter saw a ropen, with a nose-to-tail length of about 11 ft, flying away from Umboi Island’s northwest coast, toward Tolokiwa Island. It glowed brightly from the head and trailing edges of the wings. From the thirty-four silhouettes of birds, bats, and pterosaurs, Jonathan chose the *Sordes Pilosus*.

Are the Creatures Rhamphorhynchoid Pterosaurs?

Although a modern, giant, long-tailed (Rhamphorhynchoid) pterosaur with a head crest seems impossible in an evolutionary framework, eyewitness accounts suggest that if this pterosaur is not extant, then there is a creature amazingly similar living in remote regions of the southwest Pacific area. If we set aside the old-earth evolutionary framework, several problems still remain. How could such a large unusual creature escape the notice of Western science for so long? Would the creature be a Rhamphorhynchoid or a Pterodactylid? After all, some short-tailed Pterodactylids were giants, and many had head crests. The reported bioluminescence is strange too.

The ropen may have remained unknown to Western science for several reasons. First, eyewitness testimony sug-

gests the creature is primarily nocturnal; about half of the rare daylight sightings involve startling a sleeping ropen. Second, the paucity of even native eyewitness accounts indicates that the creature is quite rare. Third, its apparent territory is largely unexplored wilderness and jungle. Finally, few Western scientists or explorers would think to look for a creature that they were convinced was long extinct. So it is certainly possible, even if it seems unlikely, that such creatures really exist. At present, we must rely on indirect evidence, such as eyewitness accounts. What do they actually tell us?

First, the creature is large, but not usually gigantic. Although a few sightings were made of very large creatures, our investigations do not indicate that a typical ropen is a giant. The largest ones are more easily noticed; smaller ones might be mistaken for birds. According to Jim Blume, in the Manus Island area (Figure 1) typical ropen wingspans are reported to be only 3–4 ft. Nevertheless, a few daylight sightings indicate that some can reach wingspans greater than 20 ft.

Second, the creature appears to possess a head crest similar to some pterosaurs (Figure 3). Recent fossil evidence suggests that, with at least one species of pterosaur, head crests grew as the creatures matured (Naish, 2006). Thus, the presence and/or size of a head crest may relate to maturity and thus to overall size; fossils of the small species *Sordes Pilosus* show no head crest. Although no discovered fossil of a *Sordes Pilosus* is large, a closely related species, *Scaphognathus* (Wellnhofer, 1991), possesses a Rhamphorhynchoid head crest (Goertzen, 1998).

Finally, most reports include testimony of some kind of associated glow, possibly bioluminescence. It has been seen by natives and Westerners and videotaped, and the video footage has been analyzed by both creationist and non-creationist experts, none of whom found any commonplace explanation.

The creationist’s analysis was deeper, and he specifically eliminated any possibility of meteors, camera artifacts, campfires, lanterns, paste-on photo-hoax, or car headlights.

Bioluminescence in flying creatures is not restricted to fireflies. Silcock (2003) reports bioluminescence in barn owls in Australia. But ropen lights do not behave like hunting barn owls. When over land, their altitude has been described by more than one eyewitness as “about 100 m” (328 ft), while owls often fly 3–10 ft high. Ropen lights are also faster, according to villagers of Tarawe, Umboi Island, “faster than birds; slower than airplanes.” They’re also brighter and sometimes fly down to reefs around Umboi Island. The purpose of the lights is unknown. They could be used as a close navigation aid over the jungle canopy (100 m is just above the canopy), and/or as a fishing aid on the reefs. David Moke of Opai told me that underwater flashlights can put fish to sleep (Whitcomb, 2007). Not all ropen lights behave the same; the indava lights last much longer than the 5–6-second flash of the ropen light of Umboi.

Non-Rhamphorhynchoid Possibility

Despite similarities between reported sightings and Rhamphorhynchoid fossils, the ropen could be a completely unknown creature. Of the eight American creationists who visited PNG (from 1994 through 2007) to search for the ropen, one returned unconvinced of its existence. We know that long-tailed pterosaurs lived in the past and that an unknown creature is reported in the southwest Pacific, witnessed by natives and a few Americans and Australians. Photographs and videos are needed to confirm eyewitness descriptions.

From the Guessman-Woetzel expedition, we learned that the tail of the ropen is stiff, never moving except where it connects to the body, according to one village of northern Umboi.

This corresponds to knowledge of fossil Rhamphorhynchoids (Wellnhofer, 1991). The tail vertebrae are built to prevent much movement, except where the tail connects to the body (Figure 6).

Dimorphodon or Sordes?

After his 2004 expedition, Woetzel concluded that the ropen is similar to a *Dimorphodon*, a Rhamphorhynchoid pterosaur (Woetzel, 2006a, p. 249), citing “strong legs and powerful bipedal locomotion” and a “short, heavy beak and face” and eyewitness matching of color pterosaur pictures of *Dimorphodon*.

There were many brief interviews that we conducted along the trail, oftentimes without the time to do a detailed questionnaire with our prepared sheets or the video camera rolling.... Stories...emphasized the human-like face... (Woetzel, 2006b, p. 132).

But it appears that they did not properly evaluate all the evidence (Whitcomb, 2006). At least some of their brief interviews were done without discriminating whether the original source was oral tradition or eyewitness testimony. Detailed interviews of a few eyewitnesses are more valuable than many brief ones. The best Guessman-Woetzel interviews were the formal surveys of eyewitnesses, but these do not appear to have led to Woetzel’s choice of a *Dimorphodon*-like ropen. It seems reasonable that the “stories told to us” may include elements of the superstition that the ropen can transform itself into a man. That belief may have unduly influenced descriptions of the ropen head. It is also possible that its sightings in trees gave it the appearance of a humanlike upright stance.

By the time they had reached Opai Village, Guessman and Woetzel had heard numerous accounts of the ropen’s appearance. The old man they videotaped in Opai chose the *Dimorphodon* sketch, but why? To what extent was the witness influenced by traditions?

Was the interview sufficiently detailed to elicit why the old man chose that silhouette? It appears that he was not given the complete survey interview but only a brief questioning.

It is interesting that of the two Woetzel-Guessman eyewitnesses with sightings clear enough to recall wing-shapes both chose the *Sordes Pilosus* from among the thirty-four silhouettes. Also, the detailed accounts from Hodgkinson and Hennessy included a long tail and a long thin beak (*Sordes*-like) (Figure 3). Their sightings were 60 miles (97 km) south and 500 miles (805 km) east of Umboi, respectively. Although Gideon had a limited view of the head of the ropen he saw on Umboi, his choice of a crocodile mouth (but with no teeth observed) suggests a *Sordes* more than a *Dimorphodon*. Thus the bulk of the most credible evidence suggests a *Sordes*-like ropen.

But the many traditions supporting a “short, heavy beak and face” deserve attention. Jim Blume’s long-term research, interviewing dozens of native eyewitnesses, includes some descriptions suggesting a creature with a beak more like a *Dimorphodon* than a *Sordes*, and some hearsay reports from Indonesia support the idea of a shorter beak or face (the creature there is called “*ahool*”). Also, wooden carvings produced on the PNG mainland show a short beak, though the artists were not eyewitnesses (Woetzel, 2006a, p. 248).

Critics

Eyewitness Reliability

As of mid-2007, the case for living pterosaurs in the southwest Pacific relied mostly on eyewitnesses. Since analysis of the videos of the flying lights did not reveal any creature, there is still no direct evidence. Critics have suggested several reasons for doubting the accounts, but I suggest that most of these do not hold up under analysis; they include:

- Sightings were of the fruit bat called the “flying fox” (Kuban, 2007). But that bat has a maximum wingspan of 6 ft, and the best sightings that we have investigated include wingspan estimates that range from “at least 2 m, probably more” (Hennessy) to “30 and 50 ft” (Perth couple). The bat has almost no tail, unlike the reported tail of “at least 10–15 ft” (Hodgkinson) or “7 m” (G. Koro). It has no head crest, nor does it glow at night. Two hunters on Umboi Island witnessed a ropen hanging upright on a tree trunk; the bats hang head-down from branches (Table I). These details, as a whole, preclude bat sightings.
- Sightings were hallucinations (Portail francophone de cryptozoologie, 2007). This seems unlikely, given multiple sightings by different people from different cultures at different times. Hallucinations produce images related to personal knowledge, so why would educated Westerners and native islanders hallucinate the same object?
- Sightings result from native superstition. One news account tried to connect native sightings of a “dinosaur” with superstition (*Sidney Morning Herald*, 2004). But the native eyewitnesses of the ropen did not refer to superstitions, nor would Western witnesses share these beliefs.
- Testimony comes from coaching witnesses (Cryptid Analysis). But no evidence is provided to back up this assertion. The witnesses are available for “cross-examination” but critics have not appeared interested.
- Sightings were contrived (Cryptid Analysis). This falls into the category of a conspiracy theory, since many people have report-

ed seeing the same thing. But why would many diverse people be dishonest about the ropen? They have no motive. And Western witnesses have maintained their accounts for many years, at the risk of their reputations and possibly their careers; they have nothing improper to gain by reporting their sightings. Dishonesty is always possible but is very unlikely in this case, given the people, circumstances, and careful interviews. At least some of the accusations of dishonesty come from critics who believe that creationists in general are dishonest (cryptozoology.com, 2005), but this comes from their own bias, which precludes the possibility of extant pterosaurs.

Investigator Reliability

A few critics have suggested that living-pterosaur investigators are dishonest (Dinosaurs and The Bible, 2007) but to date have offered no evidence. From 1994 through early 2007, eight American creationists have traveled to PNG in eight expeditions (one to three Americans per expedition). These expeditions involved personal financial sacrifice. During those thirteen years, no American investigator has claimed a personal sighting of anything resembling a pterosaur. If we were dishonest, it seems that at least one false report would have been made. Surely someone would have reported something other than distant flashes of light. Furthermore, the numerous videotaped interviews of eyewitnesses force these critics to either drop the subject or to insinuate that everyone is lying.

It is worth noting that an apparent identity hoax occurred in mid-2007. A YouTube Internet video purportedly submitted by a "David Woetzel" showed a flying, long-tailed creature. The associated caption included the word "ropen." There was evidence that the image had been contrived (another kind of hoax).

But David Woetzel had no association with the video, and following an investigation, it was removed by the YouTube supervisor and the account holder's account was terminated. No investigator or eyewitness was associated with that video, but the event damaged the reputation of living-pterosaur investigators among cryptozoologists. Still, most criticisms relate to the fact that we are creationists.

Implications for Evolution

Critics have stated that the discovery of a living pterosaur, although of great scientific significance, would prove nothing in the creation/evolution debate. But their assertion suggests a dogmatic adherence to the philosophy of evolution. Any empirical evidence can be explained away—it often has been—and those who have committed their allegiance to evolution can choose to be unconvinced, regardless of evidence. Nevertheless, many who now accept it because they have been taught that it is "science" can be strongly affected by negative empirical evidence.

The discovery of a living creature very similar to an "ancient" pterosaur would be such evidence, similar to the discovery of other "living fossils," such as the Coelacanth. But, unlike the discovery of the formerly-obscure Coelacanth, the discovery of a living Rhamphorhynchoid pterosaur could awaken a new examination of standard-model assertions: not only the universal extinctions of dinosaurs and pterosaurs but universal common ancestry itself. Evolution-based theories about dinosaurs and pterosaurs have been promoted for generations, especially the idea that they are ancient creatures. "Prehistoric" animals are seen on television, movies, children's books, and food packages. Children fall asleep to stories of "extinct" creatures, but a living pterosaur could cause a philosophical reawakening: a reexamination of old assumptions.

Summary

At least one species of rare nocturnal flying creature—the ropen—lives in the southwest Pacific. Fossils of long-tailed pterosaurs show features similar to those related by some eyewitnesses, especially of the ropen's tail: a "diamond" that may be a tail-end flange and the reported motion of those tails, also similar to Rhamphorhynchoid tails. The largest ropens, probably extremely rare, may attain sizes up to 50 ft in wingspan. Those size descriptions alone, from credible eyewitnesses of three nationalities, make it unlikely that the sightings were misidentifications of birds or bats. Many eyewitness reports and some video evidence suggest a brightly bioluminescent flying creature. Circumstantial evidence supports that idea (the ropen-lights are sighted in some of the same areas where eyewitnesses have seen, in daylight, large unclassified winged creatures).

Opposition to cryptozoological investigations related to apparent dinosaurs or pterosaurs can come from the conflict between evolutionary naturalism and literal interpretations of Genesis-Creation. Opponents have suggested numerous explanations for the numerous sightings, but none are credible. In fact, more recent investigations have justified earlier eyewitness accounts. In late 2006, ropen lights were videotaped, and two ropen searchers saw a very large creature asleep during the day (Tawa Village). In early 2007, another ropen light was videotaped.

Until one is captured (or at least until significant photographic or video evidence is obtained), the possibility of living pterosaurs remains in the realm of cryptozoology. Nevertheless, existing evidence is sufficient to justify ongoing investigations into the creature we call "ropen."

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