

## A bath in the warm mud



Approaching Merauke with the view on the rice plantations and only few forest left. In the background the mighty Sungai Digul. (all photos: H.-G. Evers)

It was December 2016 and I headed out for a trip to southern West Papua, to the small town of Merauke which is the easternmost town of Indonesia. This town is located closely to the border to Papua New Guinea. Just a few years ago it was a little village at the estuary of the huge river Digul.

The Merauke region was formerly one of the largest wetland on earth. Now the Indonesian government decided to make the biggest rice production area out of it.

Looking north where the wetlands run out, enormous palm oil plantations take over. So we had to drive long distances with our hired Toyota Hilux in order to reach intact rain forest. But this is a different story.

This story is about our heraldic animal, *Iriatherina werneri*, that I found just out of Merauke. As far as I know there are only few reports about the habitat. My wish was to collect this species myself as I am just in the vicinity of the type location!



*The Rawa Biru is still intact.*

### **Let's go to Merauke!**

With my Indonesian friend Jeffrey Christian we flew on a night flight from Jakarta via Jayapura to Merauke. Here we met our friend and helping hand Fernandez, a fish collector we already met 2013 in Sorong, on Vogelkop peninsula. Fernandez had arrived just a few days before and organized a car with driver and the core equipment (diesel, styro boxes, food), so we could head out in direction of the village Asike and then direction to Tanamerah. This is a 14 hour drive.

Approaching Merauke I had only seen houses and rice fields. Are there any intact wetlands left?

Jeffrey had been here exactly ten years ago and had collected *Iriatherina* just around the (formerly) small airport. He just mentioned on the flight that we should leave the weneri for the last day as

this will be “easy fishing“, no problem, no stress.

Due to the enormous expansion of the infrastructure, today Merauke is a huge, dirty town without any intact waters. On our last day in this region, after a 12 hour ride from Tanamerah to Merauke over crazy tracks but a comfortable night in a clean hotel we have been motivated to go looking for the weneris.

Just the day before after our arrival in Merauke we had contacted the local authorities and announced our boxes for the transport to Jakarta. The officer in charge gave us the key advice for our search on *Iriatherina weneri*. There are only few intact waters left, but he directed us to a village located in the Rawa Biru. Rawa (speak: “Raua“) means “Wetland“ in Indonesian. The Biru wetlands are relatively



*Going fishing with a dugout canoe.*



*Under the river bag we found the *Iriatherina werner*.*



*Iriatherina weneri* from Rawa Biru, photographed in the evening in the hotel.



Very abundant was the predator *Glossamia aprion*, mostly youngsters of all sizes.

unchanged and seem to have a more or less original flora and fauna.

### **Please, where is the way to the mud?**

First we had a speed drive (after five days of dirt tracks a 120km/h drive is like riding a rocket) in direction east on a paved highway. Suddenly the driver hit the brake and headed with screaming wheels in a mall track with a small wooden plate “Rawa Biru“ that I would have missed. Now it was slow riding again and we made our way through dry forest at the end of the dry season.

The ambiance reminded me to the island of Komodo, but there was no three meter monitor breaking out of the bushes. After half an hour drive we approached a military post (border region!) first, then a small and nice little village called Rawa Biru. We asked for permission at the military and the local

village chief. The latter gave us two young men as guides on our way.

At the end of the village is a drinking water facility that serves parts of the water demand of Merauke. Walking ahead we reached the wetland. Several canoes waiting in the mud convinced me to leave my bulky photo backpack at this place. Have you ever been sitting in a dugout canoe? If you are not a hobby tarzan or a wire dancer, you better leave everything that is not water resistant or self-swimming on land, believe me!

### **Warm Broth**

Now the time has come to check the water values. *Iriatherina werneri* is not problematic in the aquarium. Most times they even do good in a community tank. Hatching the extremely tiny larvae is the real problem. But how do they live in nature? That was what I wanted to figure out.

*This gudgeon is most likely *Bunaka gyrinoides*, ewhich is widespread in the pacifics, mostly in shallow wetlands.*



*Melanotaenia rubrostriata* from Rawa Biru, shortly after capture. It will be interesting to see if the yellow color remains in the aquarium.



The tea-colored, stagnant water had in the morning at 10.00 h already 31,3 °C (about 30 cm under the surface). Later I found out that in about 150 cm depth, between rotting debris, the temperature was 2 to 3 degrees cooler, but not more. The conductivity was 84  $\mu\text{S}/\text{cm}$  fest, the pH tester jumped on dark yellow, that means a pH of 5,0 or lower. This is no surprise for a reputable wetland habitat.

We paddled with the canoes through a 3 meter wide channel and arrived at a slow-moving river. Along the banks, overhanging grass and sharp-leaved pandanus trees provided enough hiding places for fishes.

The first scoops with my frame net, an artistic effort from a canoe, yielded to our surprise youngsters of the predator *Glossamia aprion*. Furthermore some glass perches (most likely *Ambassis interruptus*) and some half-grown gudgeons (*Bunaka gyrinoides* or *Eleotris fusca* – who knows about gudgeons!). The top-on was a small juvenile bonytongue (*Scleropages jardini*). The season for those fishes for the market in Merauke begins in December. The first rainbowfish, a shiny yellow *Melanotaenia rubrostriata*, made us hope and a young archerfish *Toxotes chatareus* made its way as well in our plastic bags.

A baby bonytongue *Scleropages jardini* after capture in a provisional photo tank.



So we worked along the river bank and caught a nice sunburn, but where the hell are the *Iriatherina*?

The workout with the frame net made me crazy and when the guys started to go catching with a seine I was escaping to land. Shit on that, I thought, and went out of the canoe towards the mud. Cannot be that deep, I thought, but it was deep! Bubbles surrounded me with the appropriate smell. Now I was swimming and walking to the more shallow parts. Fishing there, suddenly I had my first werner in the net!

Well, it is not everybody's passion to walk through muddy stinking water in order to

catch fishes that you can buy in every pet shop for a few Euro. Imaginations of crocodiles and leaches flashed through my head and let me stop after about 30 fish in my bag. I made my way up the river bank and first checked myself along my muddy legs. Everything there and no parasites, just make a quick check into the swimming pants.

Today my souvenirs from Rawa Biru are swimming in a sparsely lighted one meter tank, up on the rack. This reminds me to the wetlands of Merauke and my bath in the warm mud. That was a great experience, but I guess the maid in the hotel hates me till today looking at the dirty shower cabin ...



*The archerfish *Toxotes chatareus* lives in Rawa Biru in pure black water.*



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Pärchen des Ramu-Regenbogenfisches *Glossolepis ramuensis* im Aquarium.  
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