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Three records of the New Britain Thrush (*Zoothera talaseae*) from Papua New Guinea in the 21st century

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Abstract: The endemic New Britain Thrush (*Zoothera talaseae*) is a poorly known, secretive resident of montane forest on its namesake island in the Bismarck Archipelago, Papua New Guinea. Here we review all known records of *Z. talaseae*, describe three observations from 2017, 2024, and 2025, and present the first images of the species in the wild. We recorded a single individual of *Z. talaseae* on 16 July 2024, on a camera trap in the Whiteman Range, West New Britain Province, in a shaded gully at 1,040 m elevation. This territory was occupied in October 2025, when an individual was detected by a call characteristic of the genus, and coincides with a mist-net capture from 2017 in the same area. The species has been documented 15 times total, including 11 confirmed records, with three periods since its description where it has gone unobserved for >10 years. We conclude with a discussion of its apparent scarcity, effective survey strategies, and its conservation status. Like congeners, *Z. talaseae* has very low detectability, and the use of mist nets and camera traps seems to be the only practical way to obtain confirmed records.

Keywords: Bismarck Archipelago, cryptic species, lost birds, Melanesia, Turdidae

Conservation Statement: Northern Melanesia's avifauna was important to the development of ecology and evolutionary biology but remains poorly documented, with many species of uncertain conservation status. The sparsity of observations of New Britain Thrush over the course of the previous century may be a sign of low population density, independent of its cryptic habits and inaccessible habitat. Additionally,

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new survey strategies are warranted to better understand population and conservation status of this species. Though montane forest on New Britain remains largely intact, the potential for oil palm cultivation and additional timber extraction to move upslope, as well as introduced predators and climate change, may pose threats to the species, particularly in lower elevation areas of its distribution such as the eastern Whiteman Range.

Sotpela stori bilong dispela pepa: Wanpela pisin ol i kolim Niu Briten Thrush i stap tasol insait long bus na maunten bilong Niu Briten. Dispela pisin i hait planti na ol i no save lukim em isi. Long dispela pepa mipela tokaut long olgeta rekod bilong dispela pisin. Mipela i makim tu tripela niupela rekod long 2017, 2024 na 2025, na mipela soim ol namba wan piksa bilong dispela pisin long ples bilong em yet. Long Julai 16, 2024, mipela kisim vidio bilong wanpela dispela pisin long wanpela kamera trap long Whiteman Range long Wes Niu Briten. Dispela vidio i kam long wanpela ples daun insait long bus i tudak long 1040 mita antap. Long vidio, dispela pisin i wokabaut liklik long graun. Long Oktoba 2025, ol i harim wanpela pisin long wankain hap i singaut olsem ol narapela *Zoothera*, na dispela i makim olsem em i stap yet long dispela hap. Dispela ples tu i stret wantaim hap we ol i bin kisim wanpela pisin long net long 2017. Ol i bin makim dispela pisin inap 15 taim tasol, na 11 bilong ol dispela rekod i tru. I gat tripela taim we ol i no bin lukim dispela pisin inap long 10 yia o moa. Mipela pinisim dispela pepa wantaim toktok long bilong wanem dispela pisin i no planti, gutpela rot long painim em, na olsem wanem yumi inap lukautim em. Mist net na kamera trap tasol i luk olsem gutpela rot bilong kisim tru rekod bilong dispela pisin.

Ol key word: Turdidae, Melanesia, ol pisin i lus, Bismarck Archipelago, ol species we i hat long lukim

Toktok bilong Konsavesen: Ol pisin bilong Noten Melanesia i bin mekim bikpela wok long development bilong ecology na evolutionary biology, tasol i no gat planti gutpela ripot yet long ol, na planti species i gat konsavesen status em ol man i no save gut long en. Ol scientist i no bin lukim dispela kain pisin Niu Briten Thrush planti taim long las handet yia, na dispela inap makim olsem namba bilong ol dispela pisin i daun, maski ol i save hait gut na stap long ol ples we i hat long go long ol. Long dispela as, ol i mas wokim ol nupela rot bilong survey bilong kisim moa gutpela save long population na konsavesen status bilong dispela species. Maski ol maunten bus long New Britain i stap gut yet long bikpela hap, wok bilong planim oil palm na katim timber inap go antap moa long ol maunten. Ol animal ol man i bringim i kam wantaim climate change tu inap kamap olsem ol birua bilong dispela species, moa yet long ol daunpela hap bilong distribution bilong en olsem long is bilong Whiteman Range.

INTRODUCTION

The New Britain Thrush, *Zoothera talaseae* (Rothschild & Hartert, 1926), is an unobtrusive, ground-dwelling thrush endemic to New Britain and Umboi in the Bismarck Archipelago, northeast of mainland Papua New Guinea. An inhabitant of montane primary moist forest, *Z. talaseae* is found at 1,300 m on Umboi and between 600–1540 m on New Britain (Diamond 1971, 1976; Hartert 1926). In both phenotype and habits, *Z. talaseae* appears to be a typical member of its genus, comprised of 22 Asian, Indomalayan, and Australasian species known for their scale-like body plumage and secretive behavior (Voelker and Klicka 2008). Previous-

ly considered conspecific with *Zoothera atrigena* on Bougainville, it has more recently been treated as a distinct species due to plumage and morphological differences (Dutson 2011; Ripley and Hadden 1982).

Like many Melanesian taxa, the distribution, abundance, and conservation status of *Z. talaseae* is poorly known. Buchanan et al. (2018) estimated the species' total population to fall between 2,500–10,000 individuals and considered it Near Threatened (NT), with inferred population decline attributed to forest clearance and degradation. Davis et al. (2018) subsequently recommended an upward revision to Least Concern (LC), based on the recognition that the majority of records occur at elevations least impacted by habitat destruction on New Brit-

ain and on the ability of its congeners (such as the Makira Thrush, *Zoothera margaretae*) to persist alongside introduced mammal species (del Hoyo et al. 2020). This evaluation is reflected by the species' current International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List status of LC, with an estimated population of 1,500–7,000 individuals (IUCN 2023).

Historical records of *Z. talaseae* span 1929–1997 and have been summarized by Bishop and Jones (2011), who expressed uncertainty as to whether so few observations indicate that the species is rare or simply undercounted due to its cryptic habits. With a known distribution spanning both of New Britain's major mountain ranges, several outlying mountains on the Gazelle and Talasea peninsulas, and Umboi Island, it has been described as possibly widespread but overlooked (Gregory 2017). Notably, the species has eluded even extensive survey efforts. The Whitney South Sea Expedition in 1932–1933 (Coultas 1931; Mayr and Coultas 1934) did not collect it, albeit with little time spent at high elevations. The Danish Noona Dan Expedition collected ~100 specimens of various bird species over the course of three weeks at 1,000 m in the Gazelle peninsula of East New Britain, with no records of *Z. talaseae* (Wolff 1966). A three-month expedition on New Britain by Gilliard et al. (1967) spanning 0–1,585 m in the Whiteman Range resulted in over 500 specimens of 98 species and described two new bird species without encountering *Z. talaseae*. Likewise, Bishop and Jones (2011) “searched diligently” for this species in montane forest over the course of ~2 weeks but did not encounter it. Due to its lack of confirmed observations for >10 years, the species was identified as “lost” by the Search for Lost Birds initiative (Rutt et al. 2024; Search for Lost Birds 2025).

Here, we review all known records of *Z. talaseae* and present three contemporary records based on field work conducted with local landowners on New Britain, including new information about a previously published record (Korejs et al. 2026). Details of each observation

are included to aid in future targeted surveys. We further consider its apparent scarcity, discuss surveying strategies, and assess its status and conservation threats.

EVIDENCE

To aggregate all known records of *Z. talaseae*, we conducted a systematic search of the published literature, collections databases, and community science databases, augmented by communication with amateur and professional ornithologists with experience in New Guinea and the Bismarck Archipelago, and curators of natural history museums with specimens from the region. Our literature search was conducted on Google Scholar in April, 2026, using the character string “*Turdus* OR *Zoothera* AND *talaseae**”. Results were then manually screened, and relevant articles cited in these resources were also reviewed. We augmented this search with a targeted review of the literature and specimens produced by previous ornithological collecting efforts in the Bismarck Archipelago. For a full list of expeditions in the region up until 1999, see Mayr and Diamond (2001). An initial list of specimens was created by searching for “*Zoothera talaseae*” in the VertNet (2026), iDigBio (Integrated Digitized Biocollections 2026), and the American Museum of Natural History (2026) databases; these sources have a shared backbone of taxonomy permitting use of the species' contemporary binomial. Citizen science records were queried in the eBird (2021), iNaturalist (2026), and GBIF (Global Biodiversity Information Facility 2026) databases, again using the string “*Zoothera talaseae*”. All resulting records were mapped for Fig. 1 using R 4.4.1 (R Core Team 2025) and are listed in Table 1. Of the 15 records identified, ten are mist-net captures or captures corresponding to a collected specimen, one is a camera trap record, and three are field observations. There were no public records on the community science databases eBird and iNaturalist, or GBIF.

Table 1. All records of *Z. talaseae* identified by our literature review. Dates are rounded to the nearest month when exact details were unavailable. Abbreviations: WNB = West New Britain; ENB = East New Britain.

Observers	Date (dd/mm/yy)	Locality	Way-point (lat/long)	Basis	Accession	Citations
A.F. Eichhorn	12/02/1925	Talasea Peninsula, WNB	-5.415, 150.039	Voucher	AMNH: 576173	Hartert 1926; Rothschild and Hartert 1926
J. M. Diamond	07/07/1969	Mt. Talawe, WNB	-5.550, 148.383	Voucher	AMNH: 814063	Diamond 1971; Diamond 1976
J. M. Diamond	07/07/1969	Mt. Talawe, WNB	-5.550, 148.383	Voucher	AMNH: 814064	Diamond 1971; Diamond 1976
J. M. Diamond	07/07/1969	Mt. Talawe, WNB	-5.550, 148.383	Voucher	AMNH: 814065	Diamond 1971; Diamond 1976
J. M. Diamond	(07/1969) day unknown	Mt. Talawe, WNB	-5.550, 148.383	Mist net/ observed		Diamond 1971; Diamond 1976
J. M. Diamond	07/06/1972	Mt. Birik, Umboi Island, WNB	-5.557, 147.885	Voucher	AMNH: 814066	Diamond 1971; Diamond 1976
J. M. Diamond	07/06/1972	Mt. Birik, Umboi Island, WNB	-5.557, 147.885	Voucher	AMNH: 814067	Diamond 1971; Diamond 1976
Guy Dutson	27/08/1997	Nakanai Mountains inland of Sulu, ENB	-5.544, 151.071	Observed		Buchanan et al. 2008; Davis et al. 2018
Guy Dutson	19/12/1997	Mt. Otu, WNB	-5.563, 150.407	Observed		Buchanan et al. 2008; Davis et al. 2018
Michael Putnam and Bulisa Iova	01/04/1999	Nakanai Mountains between Ivule & Sigole Rivers, ENB	-5.538, 151.052	Voucher, photographs of bird in hand	UWZM: A22342	Anthony et al. 2008
Michael Putnam and Bulisa Iova	01/04/1999	Nakanai Mountains between Ivule & Sigole Rivers, ENB	-5.538, 151.052	Voucher	UWZM: A22343	Anthony et al. 2008
Michael Putnam and Bulisa Iova	01/04/1999	Nakanai Mountains between Ivule & Sigole Rivers, ENB	-5.538, 151.052	Voucher	UWZM: A22570	Anthony et al. 2008
Richard Hazell, Bonny Koane, Gibson Sosanika	22/10/2017	Eastern Whiteman Range, WNB	-5.986, 150.527	Mist net, photographs of bird in hand		Korejs et al. 2026
Jason Gregg, Stanley Jacobs, Vincent Paduong, Ethan Linck	16/07/2024	Eastern Whiteman Range, WNB	-5.986, 150.524	Camera Trap, photographs, video		This study
Thierry and Marianne Quellnec, Vincent Paduong	01/10/2025	Eastern Whiteman Range, WNB	-5.982, 150.522	Heard		This study

Our review uncovered all seven 20th-century records of the species reported by Bishop and Jones (2001), beginning with the holotype, which was a female shot on its nest on the Talasea Peninsula at 600 m in 1925 (AMNH 576173; Hartert 1926; Rothschild and Hartert 1926). Forty years later, three specimens were collected at 1,540 m on Mt. Talawe near Cape Gloucester on the Vitiaz Strait in West New Britain (AMNH 814063-814065; Diamond 1971; Fig. 2), and one uncollected individual was observed being predated by *Tachyspiza princeps*, while caught in a mist net at 1,425 m. Lastly, a male-female pair was collected at 1,300 m on Mt. Birik, Umboi Island (AMNH 814066-814067; Diamond 1976; Fig. 2).

In 1997, surveys by G.D. resulted in two unconfirmed records from the Nakanai Mountains and Mt. Otu (Davis et al. 2018). In the Nakanai Mountains at 1,100 m—in montane forest with extensive moss and small trees—a medium-sized blackish bird was flushed from the ground near a path, erupting into whirring flight. On Mt. Otu at 1,050 m, another suspect-

ed *Z. talaseae* was flushed from a dark mossy grove, erupting into noisy flight and two 'tseee' calls were heard. Two years later, a University of Wisconsin expedition to the Nakanai Mountains resulted in three mist-net captures of one male and two females between 1,000 and 1,100 m, resulting in three collected specimens (UWZM 22342, 22343, 22570)—the first since Diamond's work in the 1960s (Anthony et al. 2008). Two photographs of these captures show close-ups of *Z. talaseae* in the hand, including its striking black-and-white banded underwing (Anthony et al. 2008).

Following the 1999 specimens collected by Anthony et al. (2008), the species remained undocumented until 2017, when surveys along an elevational gradient in the eastern Whiteman Range captured one individual in a mist net at 1,100 m (Korejs et al. 2026, Fig. 3). From 10–20 July 2024, in the same area of the Whiteman Range, authors E.L., V.P., S.J., and J.G. conducted encounter and point-count bird surveys and ad-hoc camera trapping using eight camera traps over a period of 11 days. Camera

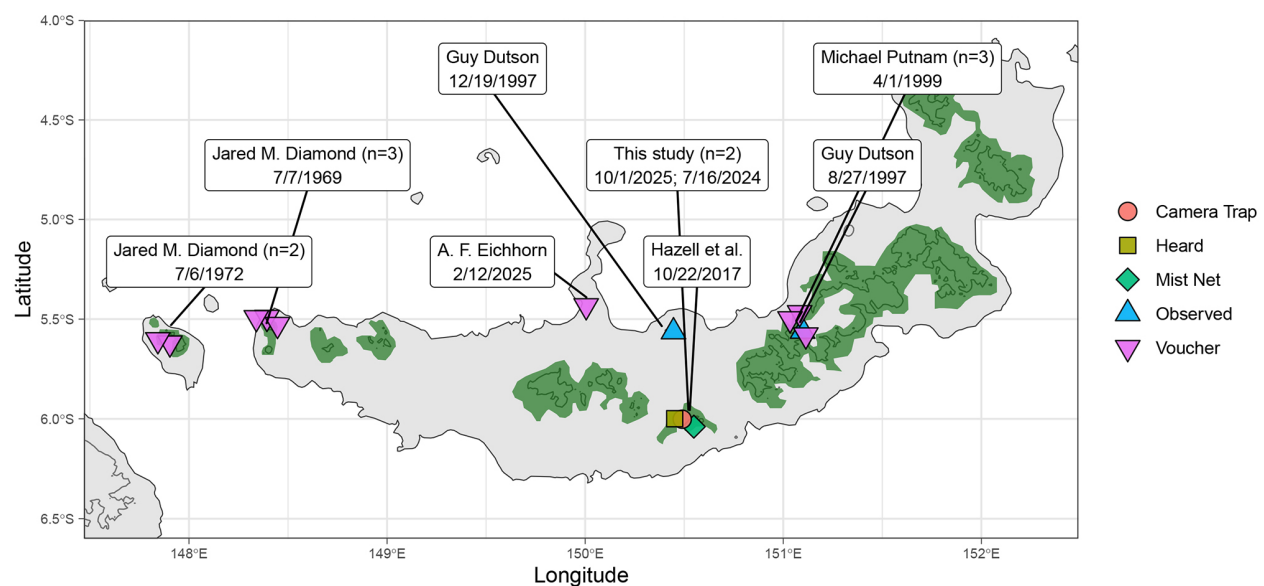


Figure 1. Localities of the *Zoothera talaseae* records presented in Table 1. Latitudes and longitudes were estimated based on locality information when exact coordinates were unavailable; map points representing records have been randomly offset up to 8 km in each dimension to prevent overlap. BirdLife International's estimated distribution for the species is plotted in green, with the 1000-m contour visible within as a dark line (BirdLife International & Handbook of the Birds of the World 2022). Additional details are provided in Table 1.

traps were operated between 13–18 July for a total of 23.48 camera days spanning elevations from 664 to 1,052 m. On 16 July, a camera trap (Reconyx, Model: Hyperfire H2X, Holmen, WI, USA) at 1,040 m simultaneously captured five images and ten seconds of video of the species, which we believe are the first images of an unrestrained bird in the wild (Fig. 4). The camera

was placed vertically 10 cm above ground in relatively clear understory at the upper reaches of a densely vegetated, gullied, and steep slope directly below a logging road. In the video, the bird appears to be foraging, and takes two hops followed by a shallow, rapid, downward bob of its body. Bird surveys in this area did not otherwise record the species.



Figure 2. Voucher specimens collected by Jared Diamond on Umboi Island and Mt. Talawe along the Vitiaz Strait, West New Britain Province, Papua New Guinea (AMNH 814063-814067). Photo credit and permission, Sahid Martin Robles Bello, AMNH.



Figure 3. The *Z. talaseae* individual caught in a mist-net in the eastern Whiteman Range in 2017 by Hazell et al. (Korejs et al. 2026). Photo credit, Bonny Koane.

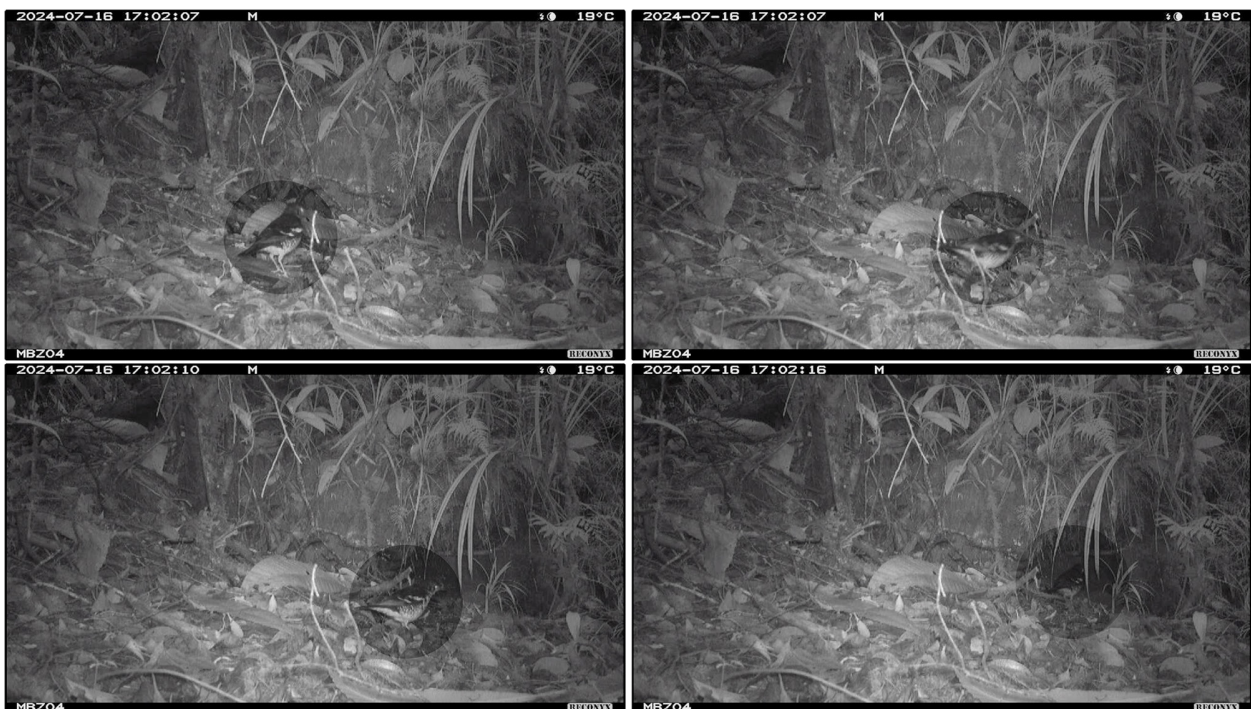


Figure 4. Video stills from camera trap capture of *Zoothera talaseae* in the Whiteman Range, July 16th, 2024. The images here have been edited to highlight the position of the focal individual, which is centered in a dark circle in each pane. Photo credit, Jason Gregg, Montana State University.

This was followed by a final unconfirmed record in 2025, when authors V.P., T.Q., and M.Q. returned to the 2024 camera trap capture location. There, 5 km of trails were cut into the forest to permit bird observations in the understory, further facilitated by six natural hides that included ten 25 m long and 3–4 m wide viewing strips. Despite eight days of targeted searching, no individuals were seen. However, a ‘tsee’ call at 1,000 m at ground level was identified as *Z. talaseae*, later heard three additional times at this location. T.Q. performed playback of “tsee” calls of different Turdidae as well as the presumed song of its congener, *Z. atrigena*, (XC944074), in an attempt to observe the putative *Z. talaseae* individual, but was unsuccessful. The song of *Z. talaseae* remains unknown.

CONCLUSION

Here, we summarize all known records of *Z. talaseae*, discuss three contemporary records, and present the first known images of a free roaming individual from a camera trap. We identified 1925–1969, 1972–1999, and 1999–2017 as periods when *Z. talaseae* went undocumented with a voucher specimen or voucher media for >10 years and thus qualified as scientifically “lost” (Long and Rodríguez 2022). Given the scarcity of records over the course of nearly a century, we highlight three important questions: 1) whether the species is rare or simply secretive; 2) how best to survey for *Z. talaseae* (and the similar *Z. atrigena* and virtually unknown *Z. heinei choiseuli*); and 3) its conservation status.

Is *Z. talaseae* rare, secretive, or both?

We suspect *Z. talaseae* is a low-density species across its range with very low detectability where it occurs. With fewer than 15 records—3 of which are unconfirmed—it remains one of the least reported endemic species on New Britain. The complete lack of observations on community science platforms for this species

is unusual for birds of the Bismarck Archipelago. The majority of *Z. talaseae* records that do exist are highly clustered in space and time. Diamond (1976) noted that birds in mist-nets both on Umboi and Mt. Talawe occurred in quick succession in closely placed mist-nets. Similarly, birds caught by Anthony et al. (2008) occurred in a limited elevational band and confined area relative to their survey area as a whole. More recently, the three records from the 21st century correspond to a <100 m² area in the Whiteman Range, suggesting they may represent a single territory. Given dedicated efforts in 2025 that failed to visually observe individuals at the site where they were recorded in 2017 and 2024, the species is definitely very cryptic and easily overlooked. Although additional records are clearly needed, *Z. talaseae* is likely a low-density, localized species across its altitudinal range that could be considered uncommon or very uncommon but not truly rare.

Effectively surveying Melanesian *Zoothera*

We suspect that mist-netting and camera trapping will be the most useful strategies to survey *Z. talaseae*. This species seems particularly difficult to detect visually and aurally due to its secretive terrestrial habits and limited vocalizations as well as its occurrence in difficult-to-access elevations, and possible crepuscular activity pattern—a hypothesis consistent with the overrepresentation of mist-net detections among records. Furthermore, the detectability of birds has been shown to be strongly predicted by phylogeny (Sólymos et al. 2008); our review provides no evidence that *Z. talaseae* is an exception to its broadly cryptic genus.

Both records by G.D., for instance, were brief and unsatisfying, with individual birds that flushed from the understory and immediately disappeared. Likewise, point-count surveys by Korejs et al. (2026) and ad-hoc surveys by V.P., E.L., S.J., and J.G. failed to detect the species, and its most recent probable record—the calling individual reported by T.Q. in 2025—did

not result in visual confirmation despite substantial effort, whereas mist-netting and camera traps at this location were both successful. This pattern is consistent with its sister taxon *Z. atrigena*, where most detections have occurred during mist-netting (Ripley and Hadden 1982), and observer-based surveys have proven mostly unproductive (J. Bergmark and G. Dutson pers. comm.) except for a probable but unconfirmed sighting by Schmidt (2024).

The efficacy of mist-netting for detecting cryptic, terrestrial passerines is intuitive. Birds caught in mist-nets may be making brief, unobtrusive, and/or infrequent movements within the forest understory difficult to detect by observers, even in close proximity. Camera trapping has been effective at documenting terrestrial scientifically “lost” and undescribed birds in New Guinea (e.g., Gregg et al. 2026; Woxvold et al. 2025). We suspect that autonomous recording units (ARUs), another passive monitoring technique, may not be as effective for population monitoring due to evidence of infrequent, nondistinct vocalizations among *Zoothera* (J. Schmidt pers. comm.). However, when deployed within a known territory, ARUs could generate information about vocalizations to inform future survey efforts, an approach used to research the vocal phenology of two closely related *Zoothera* species in Australia (Leach 2016).

Beyond these surveying recommendations, ad-hoc surveys without specialized equipment or explicit protocols remain important. Recent visits by birdwatchers to the Bismarck Archipelago have resulted in observations of birds with scant scientific documentation (e.g., Vierus 2025) and present an important opportunity to fill knowledge gaps for one of the most diverse and least studied avifaunas on Earth. To take full advantage of these visits, we urge birdwatchers and birding tour groups to collaborate with local landowners who are knowledgeable about their ecosystems, publish sightings on community science platforms, and work with scientists to publish findings.

The conservation status of *Z. talaseae*

Our review indicates *Z. talaseae* is a poorly known species that has received limited scientific attention. Furthermore, fieldwork in its range and habitat has often lacked sufficient effort or used survey methods unlikely to detect a cryptic, ground-dwelling bird. Such sporadic surveys are typical for many Melanesian and New Guinea bird species and preclude population monitoring. Acknowledging that detection probability and abundance are easily confounded, we nonetheless believe that repeated unsuccessful searches for *Z. talaseae* and its restricted elevational range suggest that the species’ total population size is low. The widespread loss of lowland forest on New Britain (e.g., Shearman and Bryan 2011) due to oil palm cultivation and the past occurrence of timber extraction within our study area are relevant threats, especially at or near its lower elevational range limit. Additionally, depredation by introduced mammal species and the direct and indirect effects of climate change should be considered threats, given its terrestrial habits and restrictive habitat requirements. On Bougainville, informal conversations with landowners indicated that the similar *Z. atrigena* was historically more common and suggest a population decline, at least locally in areas with human hunting pressure (J. Bergmark pers. comm.). Given that other insular *Zoothera* species such as *Z. margarethae* on Makira, Solomon Islands (Mittermeier et al. 2018), appear to be tolerant of introduced mammal species, its conservation status is likely to remain as Least Concern until species-specific monitoring is undertaken.

Data accessibility

The locations and dates of previous records of *Zoothera talaseae* are based on publicly available data, supplemented by conversations by the authors with experts. All occurrence data, code, and media associated with this paper are available under a Creative Commons license through Zenodo (doi: 10.5281/zenodo.20026556).

Author contributions

J.G. and E.L. conceptualized and wrote the first draft of the manuscript and participated in field work (2024). S.J. participated in field work (2024). V.P. facilitated land access and community engagement and participated in field work (2017, 2024, 2025). P.P. facilitated land access and community engagement (2017, 2024, 2025). P.T., K.S., G.D., K.K., B.K., and R.H. participated in field work (1997, 2017). M.Q. and T.Q. participated in field work (2025). B.I. offered national research support. All authors participated in manuscript review.

Ethical standards and competing interests

Research was conducted with written approval from the West New Britain Provincial Government. Fieldwork in the Whiteman Range in 2017, 2024, and 2025 was conducted with prior informed consent from relevant landowners (including authors V.P. and P.P.). Other data used in this study were obtained from publicly available sources and conversations with experts. The authors declare no competing interests.

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