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Short Communications

THE TABON, PHILIPPINE MEGAPODE, *Megapodius cumingii*, AS DESCRIBED IN HISTORICAL SOURCES

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During our study of literature about the *Eulipoa wallacei*, we encountered some historical sources, referring to the Philippine Megapode, *Megapodius cumingii*. The colloquial name for the Philippine species is 'Tabon' or corruptions of the word. In this article we describe the most important data taken from these historical sources.

In 1663 Colin mentioned a kind of water fowl called Tabon and he wondered whether this species also occurred outside the Philippines. Colin described the behaviour of the chicks and their food. The big egg-yolk is explained by the fact that the chick has to labour very hard underground, in order to emerge onto the surface. Chicks who burrow downward or sideway will die, states Colin. Eggs are laid when the weather is calm. The total number of eggs was said to be between 40 and 50.

The name Tabon is later explained by Alcine. The meaning of the word is to hide or cover and relates to the fact that the hen hides her eggs in the sand. Alcine describes the nesting ground (Tabonan) as sandy spots by the sea or along the rivers.

The bird digs a hole in the sand and after laying her (many) eggs, remains in the nesting area, high up in a tree and waits until the chicks hatch. Chicks burrowing downward will die. The birds are not very 'happily married' the male bird is not even aware that he has produced offspring!.

Apart from these 'observations' Alcine gives a true to nature description of the size, form, colour and composition of the eggs. He further describes the morphology of the hen and how the chick surfaces all by itself. He mentions that the large yolk is needed to strengthen the chick to enable it to free itself from the shelland then burrow upward to the surface.

Delgado (1892) mentions already in 1754, that the Tabon only lays her eggs on a part of the beach which is not flooded by the sea and then only when there is a Westwind and the sea is calm.

The considerable size of the egg yolk is explained by the fact that the chick takes a long time to free itself from the eggshell. Its beak is slim by nature and is situated within the yolk so that, as soon as life starts, the chick can readily feed. In this way the chick absorbes the necessary food, the eggshell bursts and it frees itself from its confinement. The warmth of the soil further helps to develop the chick. Once arrived at the surface, the chick takes a rest to enjoy the daylight and wind. It cannot yet fly but is strong enough to swiftly run away. The inhabitants probe the sand for eggs with sticks.

Hard-set eggs are quite tasty. The bird's flesh is palatable, however, after having been left to tenderize first.

Picornell (1977) describes in his translation an article by Fray Juan Francisco de San Antonio dating from 1738. This article mentions 'a dark coloured Tabon who lays 40 to 50 eggs which are bigger than those of a regular goose'. He is amazed that a bird can lay so many eggs. The eggs consist mainly of yolk. People with a weak stomach undoubtedly will have indigestion after eating these eggs. The eggs are more consumable when they 'have been fertilized'. The fat, good looking young birds do not make good eating. The eggs are usually found on sandbanks along rivers and in many spots on the beach. Only local inhabitants consume the adult bird, which has to be boiled for a long time. After describing how the birds dig the pits, lay their eggs and cover the nesting hole, the article observes that the name Tabon relates to "covering something with soil"

It appears that many authors have not made all their own observations. In many cases they base their data on " word of mouth" by the local population.

The idea that eggs, placed in the sand other than by the henbird herself, do not hatch and eventual resulting chicks dig them selves downward and die, is stated by Colin 1663, Alcine 1668 and San Antonio 1738.
This statement still prevails today!

Delgado (1892) alludes to the monsoons and states that egg laying activities are most prevalent during the dry period. Delgado observed in the field the fact, that the chick takes a long rest as soon as it reaches the surface.

We, in Kailolo, regularly observed the birds waiting for hours before leaving the nesting hole if they feared danger. San Antonio (1738 in Picorell 1977) indicates nesting holes to be in sandy riverbanks and on the beach. This occurs with many Megapode species.

All authors mentioned a large amount of eggs (40 – 50). Postell (1900) presumes that the authors confuse the nests with turtle nests. Also the 'probing of the sand for eggs with sticks' would prove this. However, it is known that among species of Megapodii, various pairs of birds use the same nesting hill. Hence an explanation of the large numbers of eggs.

In the Moluccas probing of nesting hills with sticks for eggs does occur.