

Conservation

Wrestling Cassowaries

***Searching for Pekpek: Cassowaries and Conservation in the New Guinea Rainforest.* By Andrew L. Mack. 2014. Cassowary Conservation and Publishing. 254 pages.**

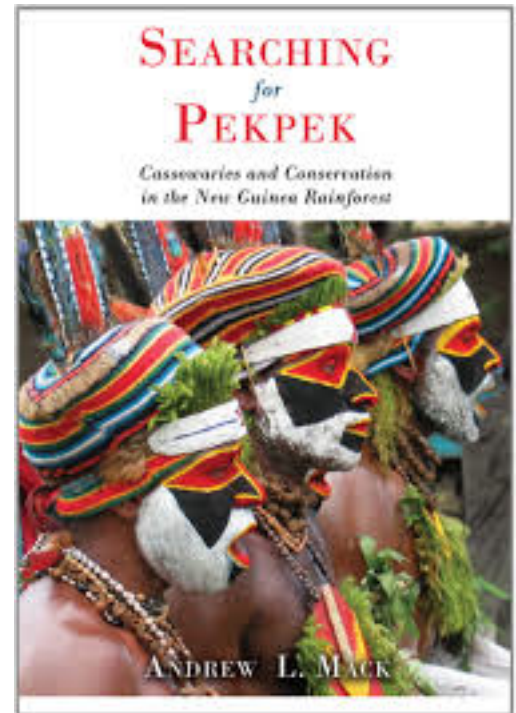
Review by [Ellen Paul](#), executive director, The Ornithological Council, and [Tim Boucher](#), senior conservation geographer, The Nature Conservancy

This is the truest funniest book about conservation ever written. It will make you laugh; it will make you cry. It will make you itch. Crazy-in-a-good-way ornithologist Andy Mack recounts his journey from science geek to sadder-and-wiser-though-not-defeated conservation stalwart. It traces the great arc of conservation over the past 30 years: promises of cancer cures to ecotourism to carbon credits and an assortment of conservation paradigms, most conceived of by well-meaning people half a world away.

Mack is the real deal. Starting out as a birder, by definition someone whose obsession obliterates common sense, he figured he could see lots of great birds by working on research projects in the Neotropics. Shortly after starting grad school in 1987, his reputation as a sturdy field worker earned him an offer of a job in Papua New Guinea funded by the Wildlife Conservation Society, complete with time and funding for research. All somewhat illusory, as it turned out. With his heart set on PNG, Mack eventually wrangled a few dollars from WCS and headed into the field with little preparation, because little was to be had. Unlike the New World tropics, PNG was nearly a blank spot on the biological map. No field stations. No transportation to or near the remote area where he hoped to work. Just \$10,000 and a stunning ability to ignore reality.

Off he went. To study poop. Cassowary poop, to be precise. Imagine the discussion at the Thanksgiving table: You're going WHERE? To study WHAT?

Imagine too the discussion around the conservation organization lunchroom table: How will THAT help conservation?



Mack explains his research amidst tales of white-knuckle episodes that would have sent James Bond into early retirement: small planes flying through mountains obscured by cloud; helicopters flying on empty; and rivers rising rapidly during the night, threatening to wash away tents full of research gear and researchers. Exploring trackless wilds where no white person had ever set foot is enthralling until you explore yourself right up to the edge of a deep ravine. No worries. The local guides build a crossing that would leave most people with damp drawers — two skinny trees lashed together and tied to tree roots with vines. Most would turn back and take the first plane out. Not Mack and his then-girlfriend and research partner, Deb Wright. They made it across and then Deb contracted chloroquine-resistant malaria. Talk about a great field assistant — when she recovered, she went right back to work.

Three years went by before Mack and Wright found a site and built a field station. Then the fun began. Over the next three years, he searched for fruits whose seeds he found in cassowary droppings. They came from the mahogany tree that Mack called Big Red; then unknown to science, it is now named *Aglaia mackiana*. The location of the cassowary droppings explained the tree's dispersal strategy. It seemed easy enough. Tiny transmitters implanted in the fruits would reveal where the fruit was taken and later deposited. Except the birds didn't eat the fruit. After days of arduous searching, Mack found only one transmitter — in a fruit he'd thrown from the station's porch by accident. After that, he began putting small coded tags in all the freshly fallen fruit he could find and had better success. Until the following year, when the trees chose not to bear fruit. It's amazing how thrilling a story about bird droppings can be.

The Pawai'i who gave Mack so much help throughout the project gave him the name Andy Wee Seae, which means "Andy cassowary shit." Mack made no formal studies of the ethnography of the New Guineans without whom his work would have been impossible, but the stories of Mack's interactions with these people and their interactions are fascinating and his struggle to adapt to their culture endlessly amusing. Though not recounted in the book, the story of Mack's [encounter with the justice system of PNG](#) is a hysterically funny must-read. Equally funny is the cassowary-wrestling. Fortunately, this laugh-out-loud story is included in the book. Before the captive-raised Huey and Louie met a tasty end, they even helped with the research project in their own unwitting way.

All good things come to an end. Mack writes his thesis and earns his degree. He decides to return to train Papuans who will then have the knowledge and tools to become conservation biologists who will protect the biodiversity of their own country. Conservation projects are sustainable only if they build in-country capacity, yet few BINGOS focus on capacity building or run projects for the decades needed to build sufficient capacity. Mack and Wright were there for the long haul, driven by the conviction that lasting conservation could happen only with well-trained nationals who would remain while foreign biologists and NGOs paraded by. Still, money was needed, so Mack found himself in the world of BINGOs and distance-planning by people who

had never been to the places they designated as conservation priorities by drawing lines on maps. One of the funniest stories in the book — told without a trace of irony — has Mack telling a BINGO VP that it was fine to be visionary but they had to think about what was feasible. He was right of course, but had Mack ever worried about feasibility, this book would have been very short: “In 1987, I was offered a chance to work in PNG. I realized it was not feasible, so I didn’t go.”

By 1999, Mack and Wright had a capacity building program up and running with funding from WCS. A representative of the MacArthur Foundation called it the best capacity building program he had ever seen. The program withstood the arrival of an oil company and a violent attack on one of the students. Then, in 2007, WCS pulled the plug. It was over.

Yet it is not. From his home base in Western Pennsylvania, Mack works with [Green Capacity](#), formed in to help support the [Papua New Guinea Institute of Biological Research](#) — a group formed by people who had trained under Mack and Wright, two crazy American birds who planted the seed of PNG home-grown conservation. **SC**