

AITo Update, Sept 2022: A Maleo Called Amirudin

This is Amirudin. Amirudin is an adult male maleo bird (*Macrocephalon maleo*) captured by the AITo team in January, 2017, and leg-banded with four colored rings that have allowed us to recognize him as an individual every time thereafter when he has returned to our Taima-Libuun protected nesting ground.



Maleo #7, Amirudin. Photo: Pandji Kresno

Though he began as just Maleo #7, Red-Orange-Orange-Silver, he has since become the namesake of our local Regent, or *Bupati*, the man in charge of Banggai Regency, which encompasses all of the Tompotika peninsula and well beyond: *Pak* Ir. H. Amirudin Tamoreka. Like his human namesake, Amirudin the maleo has proven himself to be strong, courageous, unwaveringly faithful to his home, and, well... dashing handsome!

It wasn't easy to get to know the avian Amirudin. Back before 2017, the AITo team, assisted by some of the world's top experts in techniques for safe capture of ground-dwelling birds, tried out a number of the scientific community's leading capture techniques—ones that work well on other *Galliformes* birds (that is, birds in the diverse order which includes such birds as chickens, grouse, peacocks, and Megapodes like the maleo). We tried funnel traps, where a long

temporary “fence” leads birds into a circular trap they can’t find their way out of. We tried bait. We tried drop nets, which fall from above in locations where the birds customarily pass. Problem was, maleos are just too smart and alert. Where related species can be caught safely and easily with these techniques (and were—we caught several adorable but “non-target” scrubfowl), those ever-wary maleos instantly detected something unusual, and handily shunned all our elaborate ruses. In the end, only by teaming up with some local poachers (more on that story [here](#)) were we able to capture any maleos. We modified their simple leg-snare technique to prevent injury, and in this way we captured and banded a total of seven female and six male maleos, among them Amirudin.



AITo Research team members Vivi, Marcy, and Pandji place colored bands on a maleo. Photo: Sandhy Bawotong

Luckily, Amirudin and his fellow band-ees did not appear overly stressed or distressed by the capture, banding, and release experience (many creatures, understandably, are). A few months later, he re-appeared at the nesting ground, strong, healthy, and evidently undeterred by the experience. To be sure, walking around with a pair of colored bracelets on each leg must have taken some getting used to, but it has not prevented this bird from returning, over and over again, to help his mate lay an egg for the future. In fact, in the five-plus years since his banding,

Amirudin has returned **22 times** to the Taima-Libuun nesting ground, more than any other of our banded maleos.

And Amirudin's 22 returns, plus those of the other banded birds, have been teaching us a lot about maleos—and busting a few myths as well. For instance, it used to be assumed that a male and female maleo pair will visit the nesting ground 8-12 times every year to lay an egg, but our research suggests that the actual number of visits—and hence, the number of eggs a female typically lays in a year—is much lower, probably nearer to half that number. This in turn has further implications. Among them: with relatively low reproductive rates, maleo populations cannot withstand high levels of mortality—such as has been ubiquitous throughout the maleo's range with the longstanding, uncontrolled taking of eggs by humans—and will need time to recover even if poaching is stopped.



A male (above) and female (below) maleo pair excavate a nest hole at the nesting ground. Photo: Kevin Schafer

But the good news is this: thanks to your support for the AITo-village partnership, poaching *was* stopped at Taima-Libuun back in 2006, birds were allowed to live, and the population *was* given time to grow. And the result? Maleo numbers at this nesting ground have more than quadrupled.

Were it not for your support, Amirudin the maleo would likely never have existed—he himself, or his parent/s, would likely have been taken as an egg and never seen the light of day. But thanks to the magical combination of villager will, AIto facilitation, and your support, maleos like Amirudin have grown and bloomed, returning to locally healthy levels even though globally, the species is Critically Endangered. And thus for more than five years, as a healthy adult, Amirudin has kept coming back to his home nesting ground, again and again.



The maleo is Critically Endangered. Nowhere else in the world are numbers like this seen today. Photo: Pandji Kresno

And Amirudin the Bupati has taken notice. Now that Amirudin the maleo and his compatriots have transformed their birthplace from near-extinction into the healthiest and most populous maleo nesting ground in the world, they have become the pride of Banggai Regency. Amirudin the Bupati asked the AIto team for a 2-meters-wide photo like the one above to display on his office wall, presiding over all regency business. He thrilled to the “Maleo Love Letter” signed by over 1160 people from 61 countries on World Maleo Day last November. And he instructed all Village Heads in his regency: development must happen here *without* being allowed to cause harm to maleos.

If you ever wonder whether one individual can make a difference, just think of Amirudin. Amirudin the maleo, Amirudin the human: both are profoundly transforming their communities. They are transforming the way we humans think about maleos. Looking to the future, can Amirudin help to transform the way we treat them?

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