



▲ Blyth's Hornbill is one of the largest flying bird species in the Solomon Islands. This is a male at Mt Austen, Guadalcanal.



▲ A Sphinx-like pair of Solomons Nightjars on Tetepare. Photo supplied by Allan Bero.



▲ The elusive Melanesian Megapode is quite easy to see on Tetepare. Photo by Michael Szabo.



▲ The flightless Roviana Rail was not described until 1991.



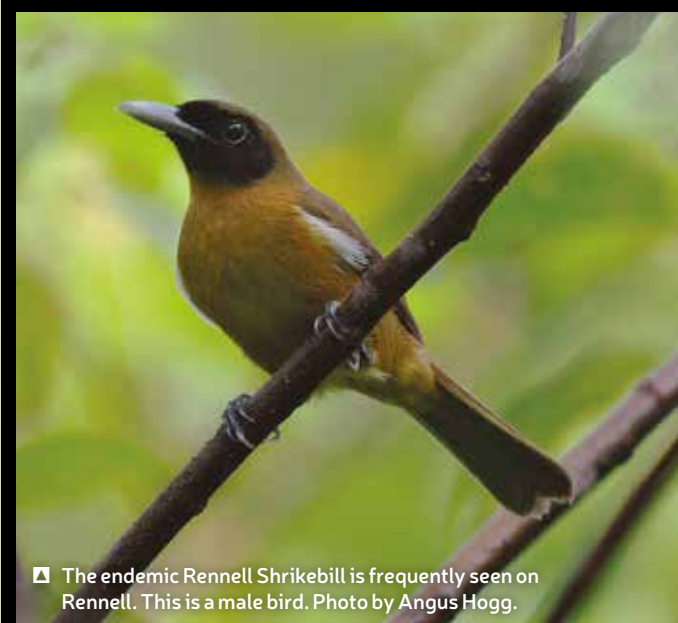
▲ Female Blyth's Hornbill at Mt Austen, Guadalcanal.



▲ Solomons Sea Eagle is the apex forest predator on the main Solomon Islands.



▲ At 9cm Finsch's Pygmy Parrot is one of the world's smallest parrots – even smaller than the New Zealand Rock Wren.



▲ The endemic Rennell Shrikebill is frequently seen on Rennell. This is a male bird. Photo by Angus Hogg.



▲ The Yellow-bibbed Lory is endemic to the eastern Solomons, from Guadalcanal to Rennell.

Solomon Islands – Giant Eagles and Pygmy Parrots

Words by Michael Szabo and Photographs by Lars Petersson

I was bewitched by Solomons Nightjars, mesmerised by Melanesian Megapodes, and transfixed by the Roviana Rail. You would be captivated, too, if you saw the amazing variety of birds in the Solomon Islands that I did during a ten-day birdwatching tour in July.

Among the most spectacular species were the giant Solomons Sea Eagle and the similar-sized Blyth's Hornbill. Smaller, but no less memorable, were the eye-catching White-headed Fruit Dove, gaudy Yellow-bibbed Lory, and tiny Finsch's Pygmy Parrot.

Cloaked in rainforest down to palm-fringed beaches and bordered by turquoise lagoons and colourful coral reefs, the Solomon Islands epitomise the scenic South Pacific. Their remarkable variety of 289 bird species and high degree of endemism has drawn renowned ornithologists such as Rollo Beck, Leonard Sanford, Ernst Mayr and Jared Diamond to study its endemic riches, and evolution itself.

The six major and 900 smaller islands form an archipelago that extends in an arc south-east from New Guinea towards Vanuatu and New Caledonia. Some islands are close enough

for bird species to have reached them from New Guinea, while the archipelago is fragmented enough for endemic species to have evolved locally. This helps explain why the major Solomon Islands have been identified as the richest "Endemic Bird Area" in the world, with 70 restricted-range land bird species. A further 12 restricted-range species occur only on the isolated outlying islands of Rennell and the Temotu group.

Ornithologists have also noted an unusually high level of inter-island variation among the Solomons' songbird species and substantial inter-island subspecies variation among most of its bird species. The number of endemic species recognised is currently 73, but it seems likely that more of the 160 endemic subspecies will be recognised as full species in future as complex groups become more studied.

Although the Solomon Islands has been recognised as an avian biodiversity hot spot for decades, its birds remain under-researched, with some counting among the least studied in the world. The flightless Roviana Rail was not discovered by ornithologists until 1977 and only described in 1991.



▲ The endemic *megarhynchus* subspecies of Chestnut-bellied Monarch on Makira is black with a chestnut belly.



▲ The endemic *ugiensis* subspecies of Chestnut-bellied Monarch on Ugi is entirely black and has been proposed as a separate endemic species, Ugi Black Monarch.



▲ The endemic *gurneyi* subspecies of Pacific Baza in flight.



▲ The endemic White-billed Crow occurs on Guadalcanal, Isabel and Choiseul.

The Solomons Frogmouth was not recognised as a distinct species in its own genus until 2007, and Solomons Nightjar and West Solomons Boobook only recognised as distinct endemic species in 2014.

And as has happened in New Zealand, some birds believed to be extinct have been rediscovered in recent decades. On Guadalcanal the flightless Woodford's Rail was rediscovered in 1985, some 50 years after last being recorded, and the Moustached Kingfisher in 1994, after 40 years, and on Isabel the Black-faced Pitta was rediscovered in 1994, after 60 years. The Makira Woodhen is known from one 1929 specimen, several 1953 sightings, and unconfirmed reports from 2001 to 2005, so it may yet survive.

110 species in ten days

The tour started when I met Brenden Mautoa from the Solomon Islands Visitors Bureau at Honiara airport, Guadalcanal, on a warm July afternoon, from where we flew south to Rennell, a large raised coral atoll and World Heritage Area with seven endemic species, and its own distinctive smaller endemic subspecies of Australian White Ibis (*pygmaeus*).

We were pleased to find all but one of these endemics on the edge of rainforest near Tingoa airfield on our first day, especially a handsome pair of Rennell Shrikebill, a Rennell Fantail quivering its wings while hanging upside down, a tiny green Rennell White-eye foraging with a flock of Fan-tailed Gerygones, and a bright green Finsch's Pygmy Parrot climbing a trunk and feeding on lichen.

It took a few hours on the second day to find a Rennell Whistler, but with the help of local guide Warrick Kaitu'u we managed to track one down by following its sublime Nightingale-like notes into the forest. While we tracked the whistler, Brenden and another local guide, Judd Tesua, glimpsed the island-endemic *rennellianus* subspecies of Island Thrush and then we topped this with sightings of the dazzling Silver-capped Fruit Dove and jewel-like Pacific Kingfisher.

From Rennell we flew to Makira where we saw the island-endemic White-headed Fruit Dove, Sooty Myzomela and Makira Starling along the coast road near Kirakira, and a majestic Solomons Sea Eagle gliding over the forest. We found that several regional endemics were quite easy to find near Kirakira, including the colourful Red-knobbed Imperial Pigeon and conspicuous Long-tailed Triller, but we had less luck finding the island-endemic species of honeyeater, flycatcher and boobook.

On our second day on Makira we took a 'water taxi' to the nearby island of Ugi, which is a 30 kilometre one-hour sea crossing. En route we passed Black Noddies and Bridled Terns, and on Ugi we soon found the distinctive island-endemic subspecies of Rufous Fantail, White-collared Monarch and Chestnut-bellied Monarch with the help of local guide Glen Star near the village of Umara. The Ugi subspecies of Chestnut-bellied Monarch has since been proposed as a separate species (Ugi Black Monarch) and the two other Ugi subspecies we saw also seem likely to be in future. Back on Makira we sought out and found the island endemic *megarhynchus* subspecies of Chestnut-bellied Monarch and the white-throated *russata* subspecies of Rufous Fantail in a roadside cultivated garden.

Seeing these birds made for interesting comparisons with the black-bellied *ugiensis* subspecies of Chestnut-bellied Monarch and the black-throated *ugiensis* subspecies of Rufous Fantail.

From Makira we flew to Munda in the New Georgia group where we were booked to spend a night at a scuba diving lodge before going on to Tetepare the next morning. Walking towards Ilangana Point from Munda that afternoon we saw many Island Imperial Pigeons and Cardinal Lorikeets in flight, and marveled at two breathtaking Blyth's Hornbills of the endemic subspecies, *mendanae*, which is one of the largest flying forest birds in the Solomons. Soon afterwards Brenden saw a Roviana Rail but I missed seeing it, so next morning at sunrise I walked to the same spot and within a few minutes I saw a Roviana Rail, which was probably the same one that he'd seen. It walked across a nearby unsealed track, pausing as it turned its head to look towards me, and transfixed me with its gaze before it continued into tall grass.

After breakfast a speedboat arrived at the lodge to take us to Tetepare, which at 118 square kilometres is said to be the largest uninhabited and unlogged island in the South Pacific. The 40 kilometre boat trip across Roviana lagoon and adjacent waters took ninety minutes, during which we saw several Spinner Dolphins leaping, a Solomons Sea Eagle perched on an overhanging branch, and several Great Frigatebirds wheeling overhead.

We were greeted at Tetepare Eco-Lodge by local guide Tumi Ben. With Moustached Treeswifts flying overhead, he explained that the island is uninhabited except for a small number of customary landowners who work at the community-owned Eco-Lodge. In 2002 the customary landowners decided not to allow any logging on the island and instead set up a low-impact Eco-Lodge offering accommodation and eco-tours to show visitors local forest birds and the adjacent lagoon with its coral reefs, dugongs, turtles and colourful reef fish. The Eco-Lodge has several very comfortable traditional timber chalets with solar-heated showers and flush toilets, and a meeting house where they prepare delicious meals using locally caught fish and home-grown vegetables and fruits.

In quick succession we saw three elegant songbirds here that are endemic to the New Georgia Island group: White-headed Monarch, Crimson-rumped Myzomela and Kolombangara Monarch. It wasn't long before we added to our list the island-endemic subspecies of Solomons White-eye (*tetiparius*) and the two endemic subspecies of White-winged Fantail (*albina*) and Steel-blue Flycatcher (*feminina*). The highlight of our morning walk was undoubtedly a mesmerising encounter with a pair of red and black Melanesian Megapodes raking up the leaf litter with their large feet.

After lunch we took the boat a few kilometres along the coast, passing several turtles and Beach Kingfishers before landing near a stream. Tumi Ben led us to a rock and showed us a Sphinx-like pair of Solomons Nightjars sitting on a tree root near the lagoon tide line - in broad daylight. Peering around the side of the rock I found myself unexpectedly bewitched by their half-opened eyes and intricately camouflaged plumage.

The next day we flew back to Honiara via Munda and visited Betikama wetland near Honiara airport in the afternoon, where we soon added Yellow Bittern and White-crowned Crane to our list. There was a good number of Solomons Cockatoos here, and we saw the endemic Buff-headed Coucal and White-billed Crow in flight - but there was no sign of the flightless endemic Woodford's Rail.

Early next morning we drove for half an hour out of Honiara to meet local guide Samson Hasi near the crest of 1,200 metre Mt Austen. Walking down the lesser of two unsealed roads we found the island-endemic Black-headed Myzomela, the small *solomonensis* endemic subspecies of Common Kingfisher,

and the country endemic Ultramarine Kingfisher and Midget Flowerpacker. After this we relished seeing a flock of vivid Yellow-bibbed Lories feeding in a large flowering tree and a male Blyth's Hornbill that flew over on wings as big as an eagle's. Further down the road, Samson pointed out a yellow-and-black Oriole Whistler and a black-and-white Solomons Monarch, but once again we drew a blank in our search for Woodford's Rail.

Later, during a second walk, we took the larger of the two unsealed roads where we saw plentiful Cardinal Lorikeets, Long-tailed Mynahs and Olive-backed Sunbirds. At one point a reddish-barred Variable Goshawk flew into a nearby tree, which was the island-endemic subspecies, *pulchelus*. Shortly after this we saw the island-endemic Brown-winged Starling in flight and several Melanesian endemics perched nearby, including some timid McKinlay's Cuckoo-doves, more Red-knobbed Imperial Pigeons, and several elegant Claret-breasted Fruit Doves. There was, however, no sign of Guadalcanal Boobook, the island-endemic hawk-owl that we had hoped to find.

Walking back along the road we saw much the same species again but this time we also had a welcome encounter with a perching Pied Goshawk. The *woodfordi* subspecies on Guadalcanal has both pied and dark morphs; this was the latter. We continued our search for Woodford's Rail along the crest of Mt Austen where Samson said it was sometimes seen near cultivated gardens, but drew another blank.

When we sat down to rest at the end of the walk we saw a Pacific Baza - a crested hawk species - circling overhead as a pied morph Pied Goshawk mobbed it. The Baza was an adult of the country-endemic *gurneyi* subspecies. The "Birds of Melanesia" field guide notes that there may be another two endemic subspecies in the Solomons (*proxima* and *robusta*), so this last sighting of the day was a reminder of how much there is still to be learned about the birds of the Solomon Islands, and a high note on which to end the tour.

Our final tally was 110 bird species, which included 40 endemic species and 44 endemic subspecies. In addition to the remarkable diversity of its birds, the islands themselves are spectacularly scenic and the standard of accommodation is very good where tourism is well established. Rennell had the least developed tourism infrastructure, so the self-catering guest house we stayed at in Moreno village was very basic, though not uncomfortable. Wherever we ate prepared meals the food was very good and food prices were reasonable in the markets and shops that we visited.

Small boat connections were essential for Ugi and Tetepare, as was driving up Mt Austen. It was possible to watch birds on foot at all of the destinations that we visited and English is widely understood, even though most local people speak mainly Pidgin English. It's advisable to arrange a local guide, especially at Mt Austen near Honiara and on Tetepare, but self-guiding is possible on Rennell near the airfield, on Makira near Kirakira, on Ugi near Umara, and on New Georgia near Munda. Having previously been birdwatching in New Caledonia, Palau and various other Pacific Island countries, I can highly recommend the Solomon Islands as one of the best birding destinations that I have visited in the South Pacific.

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This tour was organised by the Solomon Islands Visitors Bureau. For more information on visiting the Solomon Islands see www.vistisolomons.com.sb or email Brenden Mautoa: brenden.mautua@sivb.com.sb or Michael Szabo: editorbirdsnz@osnz.org.nz
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