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# *Birds New Zealand*

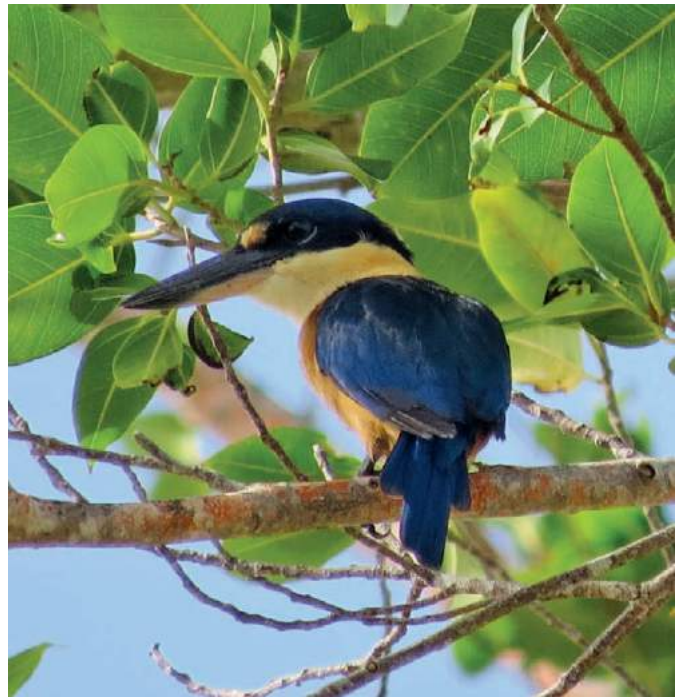


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■ Crimson-rumped Myzomela. Photo Archie MacFarlane.



■ Melanesian Kingfisher. Photo Phil Gregory.

## The Solomon Islands – Sunbirds and Treeswifts

Words and Photographs by Archie MacFarlane

I donned my best birdwatching hat, slung my binoculars over my shoulders, and grabbed three weeks worth of malaria tablets before leaving for a birdwatching tour of the Solomon Islands. The Solomons has an impressive list of 289 bird species which far exceeds the number found in each of the surrounding island groups of Vanuatu, New Caledonia, and the Bismarks. Many of the 76 endemic species are spread over a diverse range of islands and I would only have six days to visit a few of them, so I set myself a goal of seeing all the endemic white-eye and monarch flycatcher species on the four islands I would visit.

I arrived in the capital, Honiara, on the island of Guadalcanal, on a sunny September day and soon met Brendan Mautoa from the Solomon Islands Visitors Bureau who was to be my knowledgeable and friendly guide, and who is, like me, a keen birder. Our first destination was the north-western island of Ranongga, via an internal flight to the adjacent island of Gizo, and from there we caught a local 'sea taxi' to Ranongga.

After a two-hour crossing we were greeted by local guides at the beach where we soon saw a brightly-coloured pair of Olive-backed Sunbirds. Encouraged, we set off and stalked our way through a mix of lowland tropical forest and pineapple plantation until we heard the unmistakable shrill call of a flock of endemic Ranongga White-eyes. After observing these dainty dark-faced, bright yellow-green birds we continued on our way, pausing regularly to watch

some of the larger species, such as the glossy black Singing Starling, White-bellied Cuckooshrike, and the grey and green Island Imperial Pigeon.

From Ranongga we made another two-hour crossing, this time to Hambere homestay on the island of Kolombangara, where we looked for the flightless and much sought-after Roviana Rail. After a thorough search it remained sought-after, but we were compensated for our efforts by the flocks of Cardinal Lory and fruit bats that we saw.

Next morning we hiked 1,400 metres up to "Professor Camp" at the top of Kolombangara volcano in the hope of seeing the rare Kolombangara Leaf Warbler. En route we travelled through a number of farms and villages, until we met the three local guides at the last village who helped us find Blyth's Hornbill, Glossy Swiftlet and Common Kingfisher.

Unfortunately, much of the area we walked through next had been logged, which is why most Blyth's Hornbills are now found on the smaller islands and around populated areas, having lost their primary habitat. After we passed the logged area the birds became more numerous with new sightings including the colourful Claret-breasted Fruit Dove, Yellow-bibbed Fruit Dove, and Mackinlay's Cuckoo-dove.

We reached "Professor Camp" after an eight hour walk and found it to be a destination for the more intrepid birder where few other tourists venture. The guides set to work constructing a camp for the night while I admired

the incredible vista from the top of the volcano and the Crimson-rumped Myzomela that flew in to feed on a nearby flower. We renewed our search for the Leaf Warbler in the morning, but once again it eluded us. Slightly dispirited we broke camp and began the return walk down to the homestay. Just as the weather cleared the birds came out and during our descent we saw large numbers of brightly-marked Kolombangara Monarch, White-capped Monarch, and Coconut Lorikeet, as well as good views of the large white Solomons Cockatoo, bright green Finsch's Pygmy Parrot, and the local Island Thrush. Importantly for me, we also found Kolombangara White-eye and Solomons White-eye.

After a rest at the homestay we set off later in the day to check the local pastures for Roviana Rail, but once again drew a blank. I met visiting birdwatcher, Frank Lambert, back at the homestay and he told me that he had seen Roviana Rail in the area and managed to collect audio recordings of its calls, which certainly helped boost morale.

I met him early the next morning to try a fourth time. We set off as planned but once again it looked like my luck was out. Then, after two hours and several false alarms, we finally spotted a Roviana Rail! But now we were running out time and I needed to catch the boat to nearby "Fat Boys" Island with Brendon. Despite making haste, we managed to spot several new species on our way back to the homestay, including Moustached Treeswift, Eclectus Parrot, and Crested Cuckoo-dove.

After taking the 'sea taxi' across to the island we found the accommodation to be more luxurious at Fat Boys Resort and soon spotted another of my target birds, White-capped Monarch. Later on we travelled by boat to nearby Kennedy Island where future US President John F. Kennedy was stranded after his torpedo boat was rammed by a Japanese destroyer during the Second World War. This is a good place to snorkel around the reef but Brendon and I opted to go fishing nearby and each caught sizeable fish.

Next stop was Gizo to look for the Gizo White-eye. We soon saw one – much to my surprise – while we were walking down the main street. That evening the resort's chef cooked up our day's catch and we ate in a setting where we could have fed the sharks from our table!

Next day we flew back to Honiara and, after a brief tour of local museums, we headed to the botanical gardens, which was a pleasant place to spend some time birdwatching, although the only new species I saw there was the endemic Duchess Lorikeet. From there we drove to a site where Brendon had previously seen a pair of Solomon Islands Sea Eagles building a nest. We staked out a spot to watch from and shortly before dusk the eagles arrived.

On the way back to the car he mentioned that the elusive Woodford's Rail was meant to be present in the area. Just after this, a small rail ran onto the track just a few metres ahead of us, which turned out to be a Woodford's Rail! Then I looked up and saw a second one bathing in a nearby puddle. This was an exceptionally good ending to the day.

The next was the last of the tour. After meeting a local guide in the morning we went to Mt Austin, which is a half-hour drive from Honiara, and resumed our search for more endemic birds. This was an excellent choice because it ensured that the tour ended on a high note, with sightings of Ultramarine Kingfisher, Chestnut-bellied Monarch, Steel-blue Flycatcher, Oriole Whistler and Long-tailed Myna.

Returning to New Zealand I reflected on my time in the Solomons. It was certainly an adventure and a truly



▲ Roviana Rail. Photo Phil Gregory.

authentic experience. I had seen 53 bird species that were all new to me, including spectacular species of hornbill, pigeon and rail, and had succeeded in seeing most of my target species.

On the negative side, logging is ongoing and likely to result in the decline of species dependent on old-growth forests, such as Blyth's Hornbill, but on the positive side local authorities are beginning to recognise that increased nature-based tourism – including birdwatching – has the potential to provide alternative sources of income.

So if you are looking for an intrepid birdwatching adventure in the South Pacific and want to help develop the local economy in a more sustainable way, I would highly recommend a trip to the Solomon Islands. The longer you are there, the better your chances will be of seeing more birds. You also need to bear in mind that the coolest, driest and least humid time to go is July-September. Just don't forget to take binoculars and a camera!

*Archie MacFarlane's tour was organised by the Solomon Islands Visitor Bureau.*

*For more information on visiting the Solomon Islands see:*

*www.visitsolomons.com.sb.*

*See also: www.facebook.com/visitsolomonislands. Email Archie MacFarlane: aet44@uclive.ac.nz*



▲ DOC rangers with chick. Department of Conservation Te Papa Atawhai

## Bumper breeding season for Kakapo

Kakapo are having a bumper breeding season with over 100 eggs laid and 24 chicks recorded so far from all three breeding sites: Anchor Island in Fiordland, Codfish Island/Whenua Hou off Stewart Island, and Little Barrier Island/Hauturu in the Hauraki Gulf. This is the first time that Kakapo have been recorded breeding on Anchor Island in the 26-years since the Kakapo Recovery Programme was established.

Among the 37 females known to have mated is Kuia, one of three siblings that have the unique genes of their father, Richard Henry, who was the last Kakapo from Fiordland until he died in 2010. "All eyes are now on Kuia's genetically precious eggs", said Department of Conservation (DOC) Kakapo operations manager Deidre Vercoe. "We hope that Kuia's offspring will help maintain genetic diversity in the population".

Mating activity was first recorded this season by electronic monitoring devices that all adult Kakapo carry in a small transmitter placed on their back. These transmitters each contain a sensor that records the time and date of any mating activity. Each day the transmitter relays the information using radio telemetry so that DOC staff know when mating has occurred and, therefore, where and when to commence nest management operations.

## Fairy Tern breeding news

Seven pairs of New Zealand Fairy Terns were recorded breeding this season with eggs laid at four sites: Papakanui Sandspit, Mangawhai Sandspit, Waipu Sandspit and the seldom-used Te Arai Canal Mouth site. A total of four chicks were fledged. Following fledging more than half of the total New Zealand Fairy Tern population was recorded at the post-breeding flocking site at Te Arai Canal Mouth on 23rd January and 12 birds were seen at Papakanui Sandspit the following day.



▲ (Left) Blyth's Hornbill. Photo Archie MacFarlane. (Right) Moustached Treeswift. Photo Archie MacFarlane.