



View from Mt Austen. Photo by Rod Hay.

## Solomon Islands – Kingfishers and Cuckoo-doves

Article and Photographs by Rod Hay

I've had some great opportunities to see and study birds in different parts of the South Pacific, but until recently the Solomon Islands had remained out of reach to me. In 2017, I had the opportunity to visit and leapt at the chance. The main focus of the visit would be the islands of Gizo, Ranongga, Vella Lavella and Kolombangara in the New Georgia Group.

Fiona Teama from the Solomon Islands Visitors Bureau (SIVB) met me at Honiara International Airport when I arrived in early December and we soon boarded a domestic flight to Gizo, the administrative centre of the Western Province. Gizo Airport occupies a small island, so the airport bus has an outboard motor, and I was soon able to spot Beach Kingfishers, Bridled Terns and Black Noddies on the way to the comfort of Gizo Hotel. The next day was a full day of boat travel and island visits, courtesy of the nice people from Dive Gizo, but not before I had a wander along the waterfront where I saw Long-tailed Mynas, Metallic Starlings, Pacific Swallows, White-rumped Swiftlets and Yellow-bellied Sunbirds. Calls indicated the presence of Red-knobbed Imperial Pigeons, but my eye wasn't yet connecting so well with my ear.

The 30 km crossing of Wilson Strait to Ranongga went quickly thanks to the fast boat and calm sea. I kept an eye out for the rare Heinroth's Shearwater but we only saw Black Noddies and Bridled Terns. On Ranongga we were greeted, in turn, by a pod of Spinner

Dolphins, a flotilla of children in dugout canoes and, on the beach, our guide Chari. During a short walk on tracks near her village, Chari showed us Eclectus Parrot, Coconut Lorikeet, Cardinal Lory, Red-knobbed and Island Imperial pigeons, and we chased the calls of the endemic Ranongga White-eye that was being pursued by a White-capped Monarch. Back in the village, Chari showed us a captive endemic Yellow-bibbed Lory. There has been significant export of wild parrots from the Solomon Islands for the pet trade, so it is all the more important to foster nature tourism there as a sustainable way for local people to benefit from protecting their wild birds.

Our next trip across Wilson Strait took us to the larger island of Vella Lavella, about 10 km from Ranongga, which also has its own island endemic white-eye. Our guide at Hambere was Tony Kanapitu, who took us on a short walk where we added to our list the endemic Pied Goshawk (*gilvus* subspecies), Solomons Cockatoo and Buff-headed Coucal (*ssp albidiventris*). Claret-breasted Fruit Doves were calling everywhere, but did not reveal themselves. The Vella Lavella White-eye also eluded us. Tony has built a splendid guest house called Jajama Homestay, which is a great base for exploring the local area.

Later, a one-hour boat journey across Vella Gulf brought us to the centrepiece of our visit, the island of Kolombangara, which



Solomons Cockatoo photo by Lars Petersson.



Beach Kingfisher photo by Lars Petersson.



Island Imperial Pigeon photo by Michael Szabo.



Midget Flowerpecker photo by Lars Petersson.

raises out of the sea and up into the clouds like an extra-large tropical version of Hauturu/Little Barrier Island in the Hauraki Gulf. Hambere Homestay sits over the lagoon. Only a few years ago, our hosts Venti and Nedi Maena and their village were closely involved with ensuring that their part of the island was not logged. Before dinner, Venti showed us around the village, where I was excited to see my first Blyth's Hornbills lumbering across the treetops, sounding as though their wings needed oiling!

Venti's keen senses and knowledge are extraordinary. We soon saw Pacific Golden Plover, Barred Cuckooshrike (*ssp ambrosia*), White-bellied Cuckooshrike, Willie Wagtail, White-rumped Swiftlet, Pacific Swallow, Singing Starling and the endemic Brown-winged Starling (*ssp grandis*). That evening our quarry was the flightless Roviana Rail. Although we could hear one calling, it remained elusive. A brief glimpse of an Australasian Barn Owl was some compensation.

The next morning I failed to see or identify the kingfisher that Venti tried to show me (probably Melanesian Kingfisher), but we

saw plenty of other birds, including the Melanesian endemics: Bronze Ground Dove (*ssp intermedia*), Song Parrot, MacKinlay's Cuckoo-dove (*spp arossi*) and Melanesian Scrubfowl; the New Georgia endemic species White-capped Monarch, Kolombangara Monarch (*ssp browni*) and Crimson-rumped Myzomela; and the New Georgia endemic subspecies of Steel-blue Flycatcher (*feminina*) and Rufous Fantail (*granti*).

Highlights included a quiet vigil in the headmaster's garden, where I saw a Roviana Rail fossicking away like a small and somewhat shy Weka, and the endemic Kolombangara subspecies of Solomons White-eye (*kulumbangrae*). We did not expect to see the endemic Kolombangara White-eye. That, and a number of other species such as Kolombangara Leafbird and Pale Mountain Pigeon live higher up the mountain – so I'll have to wait for another trip to see them!

An afternoon walk yielded great views of Beach Kingfisher, Reef Heron, Striated Heron, Cicadabird (*ssp saturator*) and the endemic Oriole Whistler (*spp centralis*). Afterwards, a trip in Venti's boat





Yellow-bibbed Lory photo by Rod Hay.

provided splendid views of Eastern Osprey and Moustached Treeswifts. We also looked for Solomons Sea Eagle, which we heard but did not see.

The landscape, birds and warm hospitality of Venti and Nedi will surely draw me back again. There's also Imbu Rano Lodge further up the mountain, or you one can do the nine-hour hike from Hambere and camp up on the mountain as Archie MacFarlane did in 2015 (see March 2016 issue). That's an adventure to plan for another day, but who knows – maybe there are Heinroth's Shearwater breeding somewhere higher up the mountain?

An early boat trip to Gizo the next morning was required to avoid a threatened squall and get us back in time for a walk up the hill on Gizo to look for the endemic Gizo White-eye. Being a birder, Venti wanted to show us one himself, and he did, but only after making me work for it in the hot sun. Good views of Lesser Frigatebirds floating overhead added to the delight of the walk.

Our scheduled departure for Honiara next morning was delayed for eight hours, but this was an opportunity to wander around looking at Eastern Osprey, Metallic Starlings and Beach Kingfishers perched in the nearby trees, Ruddy Turnstones, Pacific Golden Plovers and Whimbrels on the runway, and Black Noddy and

Black-naped, Crested and Little terns over the coast.

Back in Honiara, Brenden Mautoa from SIVB drove me up Mt Austen to meet local birding guide Samson Hasi, who is also someone that has worked to help ensure the local area is a refuge for birds. Like Venti, Samson's senses and knowledge were exceptional. After the excitement of seeing a Brahminy Kite in a tree, he helped me get my eyes onto a Claret-breasted Fruit Dove. The ubiquitous imperial pigeons were joined by MacKinlay's Cuckoo-dove, Cardinal Lory, Coconut Lorikeet and the endemic Yellow-bibbed Lory and Solomons Cockatoo. I was delighted to see the *nilo* subspecies of Buff-headed Coucals running through the branches, and to hear Blyth's Hornbills flying overhead. We heard but did not see a White-billed Crow, but made up for this with good views of the Guadalcanal endemic Black-headed Myzomela, the Solomons endemic Midget Flowerpecker, the Melanesian endemic Moustached Treeswift, and the island endemic subspecies of Oriole Whistler (*cinnamomea*). Samson saved the best until last. "I want to show you my favourite bird," he said. At the end of our walk he excitedly pointed out a tree where an endemic Ultramarine Kingfisher was perched.

I saw a total of 70 bird species over six days, but this was just a taste of what the Solomon Islands has to offer. An impressive list



Moustached Treeswift photo by Michael Szabo.



Roviana Rail photo by Rod Hay.



McKinlay's Cuckoo-dove photo by Rod Hay.



Barred Cuckooshrike photo by Rod Hay.



Cardinal Lory pair photo by Rod Hay.



Red-knobbed Imperial Pigeon photo by Rod Hay.

of 289 bird species occur regularly in the Solomon Islands, 73 of which are endemic species. Many of the other Solomon Islands have their own endemic species and are becoming more accessible. The SIVB is supporting and providing training to a network of birding guides, including Chari, Tony, Venti and Samson, to ensure that visiting birders are well looked after. It's not just about the birds, though. The marine environment and the island landscapes are also spectacular, and the cultural diversity and languages are fascinating. There is so much to see and learn, so why not see what SIVB has to offer and visit the Solomons yourself. I know I'm going to return – I've to get up that mountain!

This visit was organised by the Solomon Islands Visitors Bureau. I am hugely grateful to Fiona Teama, Brenden Mautoa and Mike Parker-Brown. For more information please visit <http://www.visitsolomons.com.sb/> or email Brenden Mautoa: [brenden.mautoa@sivb.com.sb](mailto:brenden.mautoa@sivb.com.sb)



(L-R) Rod Hay, Fiona Teama (SIVB), and Nedi and Venti Maena, Hambere Homestay, Kolombangara.