

Yellow-bibbed Lory is endemic to the Solomon Islands.



Birdwatch

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Remote charms

With a list of endemic birds to die for, stunning scenery and a rich marine environment, the Solomon Islands are a dream destination for the travelling birder. **Mark Cocker** visited this hard-to-reach archipelago and found it was well worth the effort.

A place of tropical sun, aquamarine-blue sea, sandy white palm-fringed beaches and some of the friendliest people you will ever meet in your life – the Solomon Islands are the sort of South Pacific location many of us dream of, but often know little about.

That lack of awareness applies as much to birders as it does to anyone else, which is stranger still given that the Solomons are a dramatic archipelago of volcanoes and coral-fringed atolls, many swathed in pristine rainforest that serves as a global hot-spot for avian endemism. To this can be added one of the world's richest marine environments, some of the planet's highest levels of fish diversity, a wide range of resident whales and dolphins, and among the finest and most important coral reefs on Earth.

With so many environmental pluses, one starts to wonder if there might be a catch, and perhaps there is in the country's sheer remoteness. It comprises a chain of more than 900 islands, which add up to 11,000 square miles – roughly one and half times the size of Wales

– and lie between 8-15° south of the Equator spread in a south-easterly arc across 1,000 miles of ocean. The capital Honiara on the island of Guadalcanal is some 1,100 miles east of Papua New Guinea and 1,250 miles north-east of Brisbane. For Britons it represents a spot on the globe that is about as far away as possible.

The distance involves considerable expense and this is perhaps the other challenge that may have kept the country off the birding radar. Yet the Solomon Islands' isolation is also a part of the country's undoubted allure. With wildlife tourism still in its infancy the place makes a powerful appeal to those with an eye on the last physical frontiers on our planet.

Solomon specials

The obvious starting place for birders is the remarkable list of species exclusive to the Solomons, to which can be added a secondary suite of birds that occur across the wider South Pacific region called Melanesia. There are three other neighbouring archipelagos (east to west: the Bismarcks, Vanuatu and

New Caledonia) and getting to grips with this complicated geography, not to mention the differing and complex levels of endemism, are definite challenges. Mercifully there is a superb field guide in Guy Dutton's *Birds of Melanesia* (2011) that helps you to master the intricacies.

There is also a valuable checklist prepared by Phil and Rowan Gregory of Sicklebill Safaris, one of the few companies to run tours to the country. The latter publication (2015) proposes a grand total of 102 endemic species, but suggests that this is likely to rise as the rapidly evolving taxonomy introduces more splits.

Just as the main human population is found on the six largest islands, so too are the birds. They are, in rough clockwise order: Choiseul, Santa Isobel, Malaita, Makira, Guadalcanal and New Georgia (this last is technically about 10 largely contiguous islands). Our visit focused on the last three and entailed a degree of internal travel back and forth to the main airport on Guadalcanal, the biggest island.

I most vividly recall the first morning after our arrival. We had travelled to a

tiny islet at the western edge of the New Georgia group for two nights in a rather well-named resort called Fatboys. The Pacific in this part of the tropics is largely free of surface swell and the sight of the sun's rising corona below a heaven of light-bathed cloud, all mirrored perfectly in the water's coppery surface, ranks among the most beautiful dawns I have ever seen. We soon realised that even without all the birds the Solomon Islands are a magnificent land and seascape.

A five-minute boat ride away was Gizo, an island pinprick with its own endemic, the endangered Gizo White-eye. Immediately ahead, and a journey of 15 minutes, was the imposing forest-cloaked volcano of Kolombangara, which is home to the equally range-restricted Kolombangara White-eye and Kolombangara Leaf Warbler.

Almost as the sun rose I could hear the repeated crooning notes of Island Imperial Pigeons and the higher, insatiable rubbery chatter from Coconut Lorikeets and Cardinal Lories. Patrolling along the white-sand shoreline was an imposing jackdaw-sized Beach Kingfisher and just behind the cabin a pair of Collared Kingfishers hunted among the coconut groves.

These last five species are part of a suite that has adapted to the more heavily populated coastal areas with their fields of crops, human settlements and relic patches of lowland forest. The birds favouring this habitat mix also include Stephan's Emerald Dove, Yellow-bibbed Fruit Dove, Uniform and Glossy Swiftlets, Barred and White-bellied Cuckooshrikes and Metallic and Singing Starlings, all of which recur on several islands. Another widespread beach dweller is Eastern Osprey, now separated

Top: an unexpected treat was Heinroth's Shearwater, a little-known tubenose that is thought to breed on Kolombangara.

Below: Mark Cocker and bird guide Joseph looking for Makira Thrush (centre) at Naara on Makira.

from the rest of its global population as a distinct species. We could even watch these fabulous raptors plunge diving as we took breakfast on our hotel terrace in Honiara.

Seabird delights

Given that island-hopping is often the order of the day, one spends a fair amount of time on the open water and the seabirds were another delightful feature of the visit. Lesser Frigatebirds are common and patrol high overhead on the look-out for shoals of Skipjack and Yellow-finned Tuna. These large predatory species drive smaller fry to the sea's surface and it is the relentless churn of the bait fish that can draw in big seabird flocks, not to mention schools of Common and Spinner Dolphins.

Attendant birds included Brown Boobies, Greater Crested, Common and Bridled Terns and Black and Brown Noddies. One large feeding frenzy near Honiara had also lured a Heinroth's Shearwater, a little-known and rare procellariid that breeds only in the wider Melanesian region.

All the terns were in motley winter plumages except for the locally breeding Black-naped Terns, which looked dazzling with their pristine white upperwing surfaces and tail streamers. A more unexpected product of our seawatching was the endemic Sanford's Sea Eagle. Yet the real excitement of the boat trips lay in those tuna-driven feeding frenzies, with their sheer numbers of birds raining down relentlessly, and the tuna



sometimes so intent on the same prey that they rose clear of the water.

These marine encounters were in sharp contrast to our rainforest excursions, in which most of the country's endemic birds are to be found. We often had to exchange coral sand and sunshine for emerald leaves and rain, and beachside leisure for arduous hill climbs. Yet the rewards were great and occasionally it was possible to drive to the top.

This was the case with Mt Austen on Guadalcanal, which is less than an



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The Naara Valley on Makira produced a variety of much-wanted species including Chestnut-bellied Monarch (above) and Melanesian Megapode (inset).



hour's journey from downtown Honiara. Slash-and-burn agriculture has now reached right to the summit, but from the clearings we obtained spectacular views over the spine of forest-covered mountains running down the core of this long island. There are also intact areas of high-quality forest on Mt Austen, where we saw and heard the wonderful Blyth's Hornbill, whose wingbeats generated the powerful rhythmic chuffing of a steam train. It was also an excellent place to see Buff-headed Coucal, Solomons Cockatoo, Finsch's Pygmy Parrot and Steel-blue Flycatcher.

A key centre of activity for most visiting birders is probably the island with the highest level of endemism: Makira. While there is increased anxiety about rates of deforestation in parts of the archipelago, native vegetation covers the vast majority of Makira and it is especially rich in wildlife.

A prized location is the steep slopes around a tiny hill village in the Naara Valley, at the end of a challenging trek which requires crossing the warm waters of the Rawo River no fewer than nine times. The final destination is a glorious area of forest, where the morning atmosphere – blended of mist and ancient trees, of low-angled light and exotic dawn birdsong – was nothing

short of magnificent.

Naara holds many of this island's key birds, including the tiny and beautiful White-headed

Fruit Dove, Mottled Flowerpecker, Sooty

Myzomela, Makira Fantail, Long-tailed Triller, White-collared Monarch, Makira Honeyeater, Makira Starling and Makira Thrush. The last species combines all the tantalising shyness and unpredictability of its genus *Zoothera* with the aura of a little-known and very restricted endemic. This thrush species has hardly even been photographed.

Forest chicken

Another highly sought-after bird at the site is Melanesian Megapode, a chicken-like forest species that uses the elevated temperatures from subterranean volcanic activity or microbial heat generated in rotting vegetation to incubate its eggs. These are widely collected and much prized as food in the Solomon Islands, with possible consequences for the bird's survival. Yet it was common at Naara. Other highlights in the village were the evening roosts of Eclectus Parrots, the dawn passage of Moustached Treeswifts and the hunting excursions of Solomons Sea Eagle, as well as encounters with Pied Goshawk, Spangled Drongo, Chestnut-bellied Monarch and Grey-throated White-eye.

The island that holds perhaps the

Solomon Islands

VISITING

- Solomon Islands Tourist Board: www.visitsolomons.com.sb.
- There are no direct flights from the UK. There are long-haul flights with two or more stopovers from London Heathrow and London Gatwick to Honiara.

BOOKS

Birds of Melanesia by Guy Dutton (Bloomsbury, 2011, £40) – order from £35.99 on page 61.

ONLINE RESOURCES

- Browse photos, news stories and articles from the Solomon Islands: bit.ly/2JLeNhw.
- Trip reports are available from: www.cloudbirders.com/tripreport.
- Checklists for all the Solomon Islands can be found here: www.birdsofmelanesia.net/solomons8.htm.
- See hot-spots, checklists and more from eBird: www.ebird.org/region/SB.

most eagerly anticipated of Solomons birds is Santa Isabel. Like the Makira endemics these are attained only after a similarly arduous hill walk to a village called Tiratonga. Yet the site has become famous, especially for a trio of charismatic endemics: Fearful Owl, Solomons Frogmouth and Black-faced Pitta.

Sadly we were not able to include the island in our itinerary but, in a way, this gap in our experience typifies everyone's encounters with the archipelago. No single visit can truly encompass all that the country has to offer. The Solomon Islands are simply too rich, too diverse and too complex. One thing is certain, however, everyone will leave this tropical country with the most wonderful set of memories. ■

• **Mark Cocker is a well-known wildlife author and naturalist. Follow him on Twitter @MarkCocker2.**

Eastern Osprey has been split from the more widespread Western Osprey, of which it was previously considered a subspecies.

