

## FRENCH POLYNESIA, PITCAIRN & HENDERSON

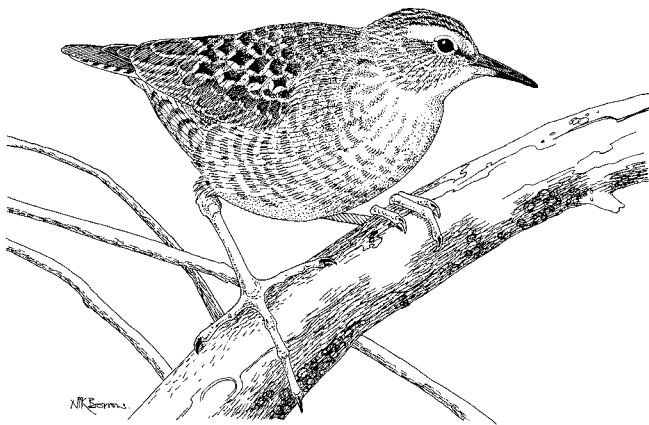
**Saturday 11th September – Thursday 30th September 2010  
(20 days)**

**Marquesas Islands Pre-Tour Extension from Friday 3rd  
September (8 days)**

**Rimatara Post-Tour Extension to Sunday 3rd October (3 days)**

**Leader: Mark Van Beirs**

**Group Size Limit: 11**



*Tuamotu Sandpiper (Nik Borrow)*

How many chances does one have to visit a scattering of largely uninhabited tropical islands where deserted white sand beaches are fringed with luxuriant vegetation, haunted by rarely seen endemics, and the seas are enlivened by a host of little-known seabirds? Not many, but here is one fantastic opportunity! Add into the mix the romance and violence of the *Mutiny on the Bounty* story, the classic, real-life tale of putting love before duty and its tragic consequences, and you have something extraordinarily alluring.

The Polynesian triangle between Hawaii, New Zealand and Easter Island stretches about 8000 kilometres across the central Pacific Ocean. This vast area is dotted with numerous tropical islands, many of them of volcanic origin and never connected to the continents. Amongst this scattering of tiny isolated dots on the map of the world, there are

two broad island types: the first being the high volcanic islands where erosion has produced gentle windward slopes that often contrast with the steep and rugged leeward cliffs, frequently encircled by fringing reefs. The second consists of the low-lying islands, mostly coral atolls and or raised former atolls. Both island types have evolved endemic birds, reptiles, plants and insects, the existence of many of which is under threat from introduced rats and human activity, and during our travels we shall explore fascinating examples of each.

This exciting journey focuses on some of the rarest and most exciting island birds in the entire Pacific region. French Polynesia covers a vast expanse of the South Pacific, equivalent to a region stretching from Finland to Spain! Its farthest flung outposts are the remote Gambier Islands at the eastern end of the Tuamotu Archipelago, and still more

remote, far beyond the Gambiers, are Pitcairn and Henderson islands.

MV *Braveheart*, our home for two weeks, is a very well equipped and comfortable vessel, 39 metres (about 128 feet) in length, with capacity for 12 passengers and five crew. Built in Japan, she was later converted for expedition-style cruising and is now based in New Zealand. She has six twin-berth, air-conditioned cabins and three shared bathrooms for her passengers (some cabins have double berths), modern safety equipment and three zodiacs (inflatables with rigid hulls) for making landings in remote areas. There is a spacious mess (dining area) and a smaller lounge/library area with DVD player, power points for computers etc. A large, shaded area on the deck towards the stern is excellent for seawatching. *Braveheart* offers much more space and comfort than a yacht and is the perfect vessel for a cruise of this kind.

Our journey through the islands will start in Tahiti, the largest and highest of the Society Islands, where we will arrive in Papeete, the capital of French Polynesia. This cosmopolitan city with over 100,000 people will provide a great contrast with sparsely inhabited or uninhabited islands we are soon to visit. Here, on the beautiful

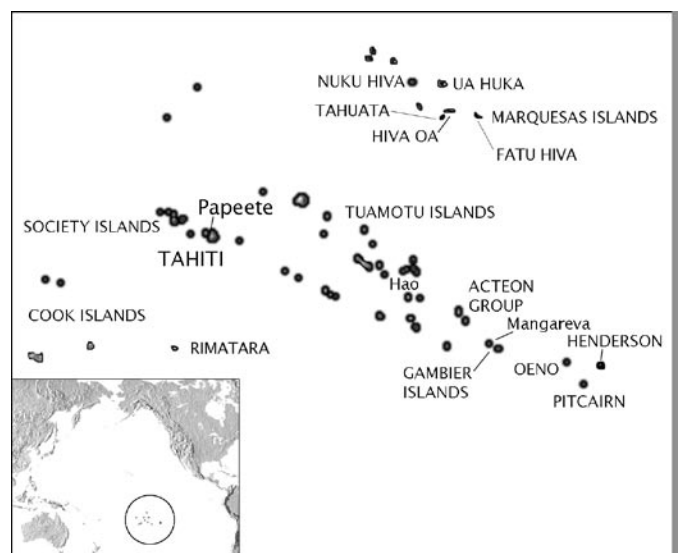
island where so many of the *Bounty's* crew fell for the local ladies, and from where they eventually set sail to seek refuge from the King's justice on remote Pitcairn Island, we will mainly be birding in the interior highlands, dominated by two old volcanoes. Here we should find such endemics as Grey-green Fruit-Dove, Tahiti Swiftlet, Tahiti Kingfisher, the extremely rare Tahiti Monarch and Tahiti Reed Warbler.

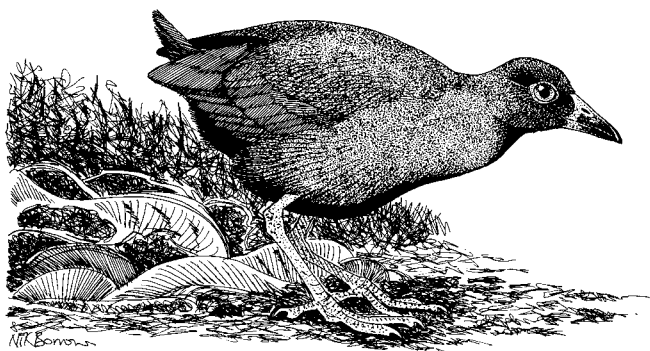
From Papeete we will fly far to the southeast, to Mangaréva in the remote Gambier Islands. Here we will board our boat, the *Braveheart*, and set sail for the end of the world, or so it will seem to us.

First we will explore famous Pitcairn Island, last refuge of the *Bounty* mutineers, their Tahitian ladies and some male relatives (the ancestral mix of today's Pitcairn islanders), where Pitcairn Reed Warbler will be the main target.

Moving on to uninhabited Henderson Island, we will be looking for the fearless Henderson Island Crane, Henderson Island Fruit-Dove, the stunning Stephen's Lorikeet and Henderson Reed Warbler, while on Oeno we will see an extraordinary seabird colony at eyeball to eyeball distance.

In the Acteon Group in the easternmost Tuamotus





*Henderson Island Crake (Nik Borrow)*

we will visit Tenararo, home to that Holy Grail of Pacific birding, the extraordinary little Tuamotu Sandpiper (surely one of the most endearing birds of the trip). Considered one of the rarest waders in the world, this unusual endemic species is most definitely a long-dreamed-of bird for many people. Tenararo is also the haunt of Atoll Fruit-Dove, the delightful Polynesian Ground-Dove and the endangered Bristle-thighed Curlew (another of the world's rarest shorebirds, the majority of which winter in the Tuamotus).

To cap it all, as we sail between these tiny specks in the vastness of the Pacific, we are going to see the most glorious collection of tropical and subtropical seabirds possible, including Tahiti, Phoenix, Murphy's, Kermadec, Herald and Henderson Petrels, Christmas and Tropical Shearwaters, Polynesian Storm-Petrel, Red-tailed and White-tailed Tropicbirds, Masked, Red-footed and Brown Boobies, Great and Lesser Frigatebirds, Spectacled (or Grey-backed), Sooty and Common White Terns, and Black, Brown, Blue and Grey Noddies, plus a selection of visitors to the area such as White-necked, Collared and Cape Petrels, and White-bellied Storm-Petrel.

All in all, this is a remarkable opportunity to explore one of the most remote and least touched places on planet Earth today, and see some of our world's most seldom-seen birds! Put

simply, this wonderful voyage is sheer magic!

During the optional pre-tour extension we will explore the Marquesas, a chain of rugged, volcanic islands some 1500 kilometres (or around 940 miles) to the northeast of Papeete. Here we will explore Nuku Hiva, Ua Huka and remote Fatu Hiva and Tahuata in search of such endemics as the strange Nukuhiva Imperial Pigeon, White-capped Fruit-Dove, the beautiful Ultramarine Lorikeet, Marquesas Swiftlet, Marquesas Kingfisher, Iphis and Fatuhiva Monarchs, and Marquesas Reed Warbler, as well as the delightful near-endemic Little White Tern, Blue Noddy and Bulwer's Petrel.

During the optional post-tour extension there will be an unusual opportunity to visit the remote island of Rimatara in the Austral Islands, far to the south of Tahiti. The island is home to the only surviving natural population of the beautiful Kuhl's (or Rimatara) Lorikeet and the endemic Rimatara Reed Warbler.

Birdquest has operated tours to French Polynesia since 2002 and to Pitcairn and Henderson since 2008.

### Itinerary

**Day 1** Afternoon flight from London bound for Los Angeles, arriving in the evening for an overnight stay.

**Day 2** Morning flight to Papeete, arriving in the afternoon for a two nights stay.

Our very fancy resort hotel is located by the ocean and has fantastic views across to the mountainous island of Moorea with its conical volcanic peaks. It is a great place to rest up after the long journey. Many introduced birds are present in the grounds, including Zebra Dove, Red-vented Bulbul, Common Myna, Silvereye, Common Waxbill and Chestnut-breasted Mannikin, some of which will undoubtedly try to share our food as we eat in the open air restaurant!

**Day 3** This morning, with the help of a local expert, we will explore one of Tahiti's island's deep forested valleys. Here we will find the endemic Tahiti Monarch, now critically endangered with perhaps only about 40 individuals surviving, and we will also be able to visit a colony of endemic Tahiti Swiftlets, watching the adults whizzing along a narrow, rocky defile as they return to, or leave, their nests. Two other endemics we should find this morning are the attractive Grey-green Fruit-Dove and the noisy Tahiti Kingfisher. During the afternoon we will visit the mountainous interior of Tahiti in search of the endemic Tahiti Reed Warbler, which favours tall bamboo thickets. We are also likely to encounter Pacific Black Duck, Pacific Swallow (the nominate race here is dark and very different to most other populations) and the introduced Swamp Harrier and Red-browed Firetail.

**Day 4** This morning we will catch one of the very infrequent flights to Mangaréva in the remote Gambier islands at the far eastern end of the scattered Tuamotu archipelago. It is a long flight, for a domestic route, over 1600 kilometres (1000 miles) as the Tahiti Petrel flies, and the journey is broken by a stopover at the almost equally remote Hao atoll. As we descend over this huge atoll, so large that one cannot even see the far

side, it will be brought home to us how little land there is in the Tuamotus: just thin barrier islands and numerous tiny islets (known locally as *motu*) projecting above the water on top of the coral reef forming the atoll and protecting a huge, impossibly turquoise lagoon. Everywhere are beaches of white sand, backed by the deep greens of coconut palms and native island 'bush'. Once we arrive at Mangaréva, where Pacific Golden plovers favour the grassy edges of the runway, we will transfer by ferry from the airport island to the harbour of the main island, where *Braveheart*, our home for the next 14 nights, will be waiting for us. During the afternoon we will set sail for the magical, largely uninhabited world of the islands that awaits us. As we head southeastwards, towards Pitcairn island, we will keep a lookout for Phoenix and Herald Petrels, Christmas Shearwater, Polynesian Storm-Petrel, Great and Lesser Frigatebirds, Greater Crested Tern, and Brown and Black Noddies.

**Days 5-17** During our two weeks on *Braveheart* we shall explore the easternmost Tuamotu Islands and the even more remote Pitcairn, Henderson and Oeno Islands. The run to Pitcairn will take about 36 hours, but the journey will provide some interesting seabird opportunities. In addition to some of the species likely as we left Mangaréva, we will be keeping a lookout for our first Murphy's and Henderson's Petrels, Flesh-footed Shearwater, Tropical Shearwater (split from Audubon's) and White-faced Storm-Petrel.

Not many travellers have the chance or the privilege of stepping ashore on rugged Pitcairn Island, so we shall join a select band as we explore this fascinating spot where the *Bounty* mutineers ended up. As with almost all



*White-tailed Tropicbirds (Nik Borrow)*

of our landings, we will not be able to get ashore directly from *Braveheart*, so we will use the zodiacs instead. Although Pitcairn and its dependencies are an overseas territory of the United Kingdom, the islands are effectively administered from New Zealand, itself amazingly distant. Pitcairn's isolation is exacerbated by the lack of an airport, and there are no regular shipping connections, so visitors are a rare event! We are sure to be made most welcome and no doubt some of us will want to visit the post office in the small settlement in order to buy those sought-after Pitcairn stamps to put on the ritual postcards. Pitcairn's single-island endemic, the Pitcairn Reed Warbler, is common on the island, so we will have no trouble finding some, and we will also be able to admire the pretty little Grey Noddy and a small colony of Masked Boobies.

As we wait for the zodiacs to take us back to *Braveheart*, we will be only about 100 meters from where the blazing hulk of the *Bounty* sank after the mutineers decided to burn her to leave no easily visible

trace of their presence. As with any such tale, both sides have strong views. From the islander's perspective Captain Bligh was a cruel tyrant who virtually compelled Fletcher Christian and his allies to mutiny, yet if that were truly the case one wonders why so many of the crew elected to join Bligh in a small open boat when the mutineers put him off the ship in the then unknown seas off Tonga, facing almost certain death. And one marvels at a man who could then save his men by a remarkable feat of seamanship, sailing that tiny boat 3700 nautical miles, all the way to Kupang in Timor, in the then Dutch East Indies.

As we sail northeast from Pitcairn to Henderson Island we will encounter more and more Henderson's Petrels, a species that only nests in this remote, uninhabited place (and which was formerly, mistakenly, considered a dark morph of Herald Petrel), and we should also come across Kermadec Petrel. We will reach the southernmost point of our voyage in the waters around Pitcairn and its dependencies, so we will

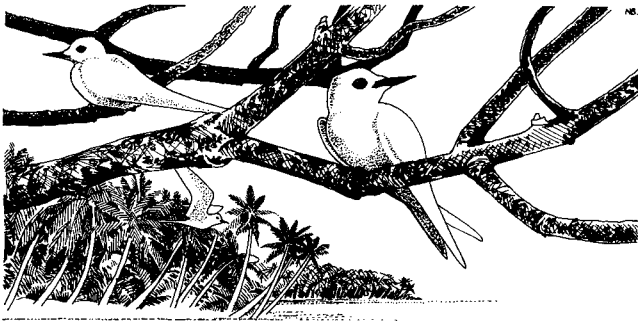
be looking out for cool-water wanderers throughout the region, such as albatrosses, giant petrels, and Cape and White-chinned Petrels.

Unlike rugged Pitcairn, Henderson is a raised coral reef and so is basically a flat, thickly vegetated plateau of limestone rising 20 metres or so above sea-level. After finding our way from the beach up onto the plateau we will start looking for Henderson's four single-island endemics. Most of the flightless crakes of the Pacific islands have long been extinct, but sheer isolation and unsuitability for human settlement has allowed the bold little Henderson Island Crake to survive. We should eventually be able to find one or two of these rather inquisitive little birds wandering around under the scrubby woodland, feeding in the leaf litter. Henderson Reed Warbler (split from Pitcairn) is a common species on the island, but we will probably have to work harder for good views of the stunning Stephen's Lorikeet and the attractive Henderson Island Fruit-Dove.

From Henderson we turn to the west and sail to Oeno island, the last of the Pitcairn islands group that we will visit. Oeno is a coral atoll with a perfect 'desert island', covered in luxuriant vegetation and surrounded by white coral sand beaches, in the middle! The seabird colony here is truly spectacular, with breeding Murphy's Petrels running into the thousands (the calling birds hovering over the colonies are a true marvel to behold), along with smaller numbers of Christmas Shearwaters, Great Frigatebirds, Masked and Red-footed Boobies, Red-tailed Tropicbirds, and Spectacled (or Grey-backed), Sooty and Common White (or Fairy) Terns. As with all remote and uninhabited tropical islands, the seabirds

are unafraid of man, so we will be able to enjoy some extraordinary views and will feel truly privileged to be able to wander around in such a wonderful place. In particular, watching the lovely Common White Tern at such close range that one can see its 'mascara-like' dark eye smudge (which enhances its already huge eye, perhaps adapted for seeing in the forest interior) and the blue base to the dagger-like bill, is a real delight. Long-tailed Cuckoos (or Long-tailed Koels) from New Zealand spend the Austral winter on Pacific islands like Oeno, so we will keep a lookout for this interesting species.

Sailing now to the northwest, we will have a full day at sea with great opportunities for a selection of *Pterodroma* species (including Collared and White-necked Petrels) and other deepwater pelagics, including Tahiti Petrel and White-bellied Storm-Petrel. We could also come across some Humpback Whales at a seamount, enjoying watching them breaching before they crash back into the ocean in spectacular fashion, sending up a huge sheet of spray. Eventually we come to the Acteon group of islands and in particular the island of Tenararo. This beautiful and remote uninhabited island, which is rat-free, is this one of the last breeding sites for the rare and enigmatic Tuamotu Sandpiper. As we step ashore on this pristine desert island and our footprints mark the virgin white sand we will feel quite Robinson Crusoe-like! It should not take long before we find the little sandpiper, which feeds mostly along the tideline (they may run down the beach to greet us!) but also spends much time walking on the leaf litter under the tangled jungle of the island's interior, or can even be watched walking up tree branches. When the birds display they hover and veer in the manner of Temminck's Stint, all the while uttering their beautiful trilling call. Even better is



*Common White or Fairy Terns (Nik Borrow)*

their confiding manner (not a help with rats, sadly) and we should be able to walk right up to them without causing any concern! On Tenararo this wonderful bird remains extraordinarily common and we may see up to 100-200 individuals during our visit!

Amongst the trees and bushes on Tenararo we should easily find another Tuamotu endemic, the beautiful Atoll Fruit-Dove. We will also search for the unobtrusive but dazzling little Polynesian Ground-Dove, which as its name suggests spends its time on the ground. We will have to search patiently and carefully, for these birds are both slow-moving and unafraid, so they can even be spotted walking along right next to one's feet! If we are in luck we will be able to watch the male displaying close to us, stretching out its wings to display their purple iridescence. Sadly this species has disappeared from most of its range in the Tuamotus owing to the depredations of rats. This is also a good island for seeing Bristle-thighed Curlew, a species that flies south from Alaska to the Tuamotus to winter in paradise, and Wandering Tattler.

We may have time to visit another of the Tuamotu atolls, such as Morane, but our highest priority will be to see the key endemic landbirds and pelagic seabirds well, so we will spend more time in

places like Henderson if we need to.

**Day 18** This morning we will go ashore at Mangareva and head for the airport in time for the afternoon flight to Papeete, where we connect with an evening flight bound for London.

**Day 19** In transit to London.

**Day 20** Morning arrival at London.

#### **Rimatara Post-Tour Extension Itinerary**

**Day 18** We will overnight in Papeete.

**Day 19** This morning we will take a flight to Rimatara in the Austral Islands for a two nights stay. The remote Austral (or Tubuai) Islands lie to the south of the Society Islands where Tahiti is situated. This afternoon we will have a first chance to explore the island.

**Day 20** Today we shall explore this beautiful island where the exquisite Kuhl's (or Rimatara) Lorikeet is still common, having been extirpated elsewhere in its range. The island also has another endemic species, Rimatara Reed Warbler (now split from Pitcairn Reed Warbler) and Tahiti Petrels can regularly be seen from the shore.

**Day 21** After some final birding on Rimatara we will take a flight back to Papeete,

where we connect with an evening flight bound for London.

**Day 22** In transit to London.

**Day 23** Morning arrival at London.

#### **Marquesas Islands Pre-Tour Extension Itinerary**

**Day 1** Afternoon flight from London bound for Los Angeles, arriving in the evening for an overnight stay.

**Day 2** Morning flight to Papeete, arriving in the afternoon for an overnight stay.

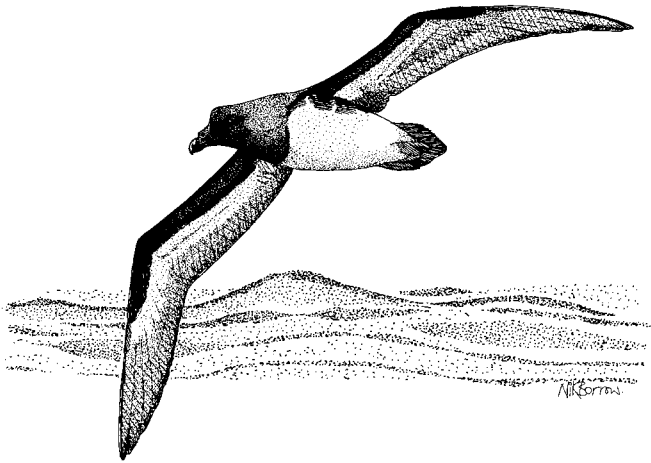
**Day 3** This morning we will fly to the island of Nuku Hiva in the distant Marquesas for an overnight stay, covering a greater distance (nearly 1500 kilometres) than that between London and Rome! En route we should enjoy some fine aerial views of the Tuamotus. The airport, for want of suitable flat land elsewhere, was constructed in the far northwest of the island, at the opposite end of the island from the two main villages, so we will cross this rugged and spectacular island before we reach Taiohae, where we will stay for two nights. This very scenic island has many high rocky peaks, rising to 1224m at the summit of Mount Tekao, and sheer coastal cliffs that rise to over 500m in places. Later today we will visit the best part of the island for finding the endemic Nukuhiva Imperial Pigeon. This huge dark and rather lethargic pigeon has a broad, flat, white-feathered protuberance projecting above its bill, giving it a decidedly strange appearance, and its weird, rather unpigeon-like calls simply add to the mystique of this very rare bird that now numbers only about 200 individuals (shared between Nukuhiva and Ua Huka, where the species has been reintroduced). We should be able to find some sitting in some large fig trees and

obtain splendid views of this unusual species. We will also have our first encounters with three more endemics: White-capped Fruit-Dove, Marquesas Swiftlet and Marquesas Reed Warbler, all of which are common. Our first Little White Terns (or Little Fairy Terns), a near-endemic species, will be seen flying high overhead or perching in roadside trees, sometimes alongside Black Noddies. Along the rugged volcanic coastline we will keep a lookout for the pretty Blue Noddy (formerly lumped with Grey Noddy under the name Blue-grey Noddy).

**Day 4** After some final birding on Nuku Hiva we will take a short flight across to the nearby island of Ua Huka for an overnight stay. Here the surroundings of our delightfully situated guesthouse hold the beautiful endemic Ultramarine Lorikeet, which is now extinct on the other inhabited islands in the Marquesas, but which remains fairly common here, and the endemic Iphis Monarch (now restricted to Ua Huka).

**Day 5** After some more birding on Ua Huka we will take another short flight to Hiva Oa and then take one of the local boats to the remote island of Fatu Hiva for a two nights stay. The journey is good for pelagic seabirds and we should encounter Tahiti and Bulwer's Petrels, Wedge-tailed Shearwater and the impressively large and well-marked Polynesian Storm-Petrel.

**Day 6** Fatu Hiva is a rugged and very beautiful island with much remaining forest on the steep mountainsides. This morning we will walk up a partly cultivated valley and check out some forest patches for the rare and now, following the introduction of Black Rats, endangered Fatuhiva Monarch. As long as we have had good views of the monarch, we will make an outing in the afternoon to the north of the island. The road



Tahiti Petrel (Nik Borrow)

goes over a spectacular pass and then descends to the Baie des Vierges (Bay of Virgins Bay), famous for the phallic rock formations that led the early whalers to name the place Baie des Verges (Bay of Penises) before some outraged missionaries re-christened it!

**Day 7** After some final birding on Fatu Hiva we will return to Hiva Oa for a two nights stay at the small town of Atuona.

**Day 8** Today we will visit the sparsely inhabited island of Tahuata, which lies to the south of the western end of Hiva Oa. This is very likely the last surviving haunt of the smart Marquesas Kingfisher,

which has probably now died out on Hiva Oa. With some persistence we should get great views of this very rare bird.

**Day 9** Today we will fly back to Nuku Hiva where we connect with an onward flight to Papeete on Tahiti for a three nights stay.

**Day 10** There will be a chance for some birding on Tahiti this morning before we meet up with those arriving for the main tour. (This is Day 2 of the main tour).

**Accommodation & Road Transport:** The hotel in Papeete is of normal

Birdquest standard (luxurious in fact!). For details of *Braveheart*, please see the tour introduction. During the extensions, the guesthouse accommodation is simple but very clean and comfortable, and bathroom facilities may be shared. Road transport will be by minibus and roads (where they exist) are mostly good.

**Walking:** The walking effort is easy almost throughout, but there will be one more difficult walk on Tahiti.

**Climate:** Warm or hot and humid. Occasional rain is likely. At sea it can feel noticeably cooler, especially early and late in the day.

**Bird Photography:** Opportunities are good.

**Tour Price:** £7560, €8921, \$12474 London/London (or £6460, €7623, \$10659 Papeete/Papeete). Pre-Tour Extension: £2400, €2832, £3960. Post-Tour Extension: £900, €1062, \$1485. Please note that, for those taking London/London arrangements, the hotel accommodation in Los Angeles is included (and there is a courtesy bus service from/to the airport), but meals are not included. Price includes all transportation (including all flights), all accommodations, all meals, bottled water, some drinks, all

excursions, all entrance fees, all tips for local drivers/guides and for accommodations/restaurants ashore, leader services.

**Single Room Supplement:** £210, €248, \$347 (Papeete only), plus £40, €47, \$66 at Los Angeles if joining London/London. If you would like guaranteed single occupancy of a cabin on board *Braveheart* the additional charge is £5500, €6490, \$9075. Please note that if you opt to share you will not have to pay the single occupancy supplement even if you do not end up with a cabin-mate. As there are only a small number of cabins on *Braveheart*, participants travelling alone will have to be prepared to share a cabin with someone of either sex if need be. Bathroom facilities are not en-suite, but elsewhere on the boat, so privacy is assured. If the boat is not full, any spare cabins will be used in the first place to remove the need for any sharing with the opposite sex. Pre-Tour Extension: £400, €472, \$660. Post-Tour Extension: £150, €177, \$248.

**Deposit:** £1800, €2124, \$2970. Pre-Tour Extension: £240, €283, \$396. Post-Tour Extension: £90, €106, \$149. If booking more than 12 months before departure, the initial deposit is only £900, €1062, \$1485.