



The wonderfully bizarre Solomons Frogmouth was the 'Bird of the Trip' (Josh Bergmark)

THE SOLOMON ISLANDS

6 JULY – 1 AUGUST 2017

LEADER: MARK VAN BEIRS and JOSH BERGMARK

Magnificent, but often skulking birds. Mud, sweat, slippery trails, steep mountains, shaky logistics, and an airline with a dubious reputation. This is what the Solomon Islands tour is all about, but these forgotten islands in the southwest Pacific hold some glorious, very rarely observed birds that very few birders will ever have the privilege to add to their lifelist. Our tour total this year included a great selection and a large percentage of the endemic birds and specialities. The Solomon Islands comprise Endemic Bird Areas 198 and 199, and although the total area of this archipelago is smaller than Belgium (less than 50,000 km²), these rich islands have more restricted range species than any other Endemic Bird Area in the world! Of the Solomons EBA endemics, we recorded 64 of the 68 possible species on this route, plus an additional clean sweep of the 13 available Melanesian endemics. We had good looks at three genera that are endemic to the Solomon Islands: *Rigidipenna* (Solomons Frogmouth), *Meliarchus* (Makira Honeyeater) and *Woodfordia* (Bare-eyed White-eye). This tour is definitely one of our toughest trips through a combination of intense physical effort, unpredictable weather and capricious logistics. The treacherous paths of the Makira hills, the tough hike and overnight high on Kolombangara volcano and the sometimes brutally steep, slippery trails of Santa Isabel will long be remembered by all participants. We birded the islands of Guadalcanal, Rennell,



The male Eclectus Parrot is a glorious creature (tour participant Mark Tasker)

Gizo and Malaita by road, cruised into Ranongga and Vella Lavella by boat, and trekked up into the mountains of Makira, Kolombangara and Santa Isabel. The bird of the tour was the incredible and truly bizarre Solomons Frogmouth that posed so very, very well for us. The eye-ball to eye-ball views of a sleeping North Solomons Dwarf Kingfisher were also very much appreciated. The fantastic series of endemics ranged from Sanford's Sea Eagles, through the many pigeons and doves and parrots, from cockatoos to pygmy parrots, to a biogeographer's dream array of myzomelas, monarchs and white-eyes. We also enjoyed a close insight into the lifestyle and culture of this traditional, very religious Pacific country, and into the complex geography of its beautiful forests and islet-studded reefs.

The tour started at the airport of Honiara, the capital of the Melanesian Commonwealth country of the Solomon Islands. This fairly small town is situated on the island of Guadalcanal, which for most of its history has been a quiet, unknown, backwater place, but which reached the news headlines for a short while through its turbulent World War II events. Our very international group of six, well-travelled male participants, my young, keen and well-prepared Australian co-leader Josh, and myself, were welcomed by our smiling, experienced driver. In the afternoon we started our introduction to Solomon Islands birding by visiting the well-known Betikama wetland, a marshy area surrounded by grass-covered hills and stretches of well-developed woodland. Endemic, pure white Solomons Cockatoos were particularly obvious as they flew noisily about and showed very well. Both males and females of the glorious Eclectus Parrots attracted our attention and several, very colourful, endemic Yellow-bibbed Lories perched up in the open trees. The greatest surprise of the afternoon was an Australian Hobby, which allowed excellent scope views as it sat in a small dead tree. Some research revealed that our observation constituted the first record for the Solomon Islands! Other more widespread species noted included Pacific Black Duck, Great and Intermediate Egrets, Little Pied Cormorant, Australasian Swamphen, Red-knobbed Imperial Pigeon, superbly elegant Moustached Treeswifts, Glossy Swiftlet, Cardinal Lory, Coconut Lorikeet (a fairly recent split from Rainbow Lorikeet), White-bellied Cuckooshrike, Willie Wagtail, a flighty male Steel-blue Flycatcher, Metallic and Singing Starlings and Long-tailed Myna. We heard the threatening, growling calls of an endemic Buff-headed Coucal emanate from a dense patch of vine-covered trees, but it didn't want to show. Introduced Common Mynas were by far the most common birds in and around the town of Honiara.



Solomons Cockatoos are fairly common; this Australian Hobby is probably a first for the Solomon Islands (Mark Van Beirs)

Early next morning we drove up to Mount Austen, a ridge of forested hills behind the town, where in World War II some truly ferocious fighting took place. We walked slowly along a wide track through excellent forest and encountered several fruiting trees, where impressive, noisy Blyth's Hornbills were hopping about, together with MacKinlay's Cuckoo-Doves, attractive Claret-breasted Fruit Doves and Red-knobbed Imperial Pigeons. A flowering African Tulip tree gave us perfect views of several endemic Yellow-bibbed Lories. Unfriendly snarling betrayed the presence of huge Buff-headed Coucals, which showed fleetingly. A very well behaved, endemic Chestnut-bellied Monarch was much favoured by the photographers and a pair of

endemic Steel-blue Flycatchers performed a nice bit of display. A noisy, endemic White-billed Crow gave great looks, parties of endemic Brown-winged Starlings were sunbathing high in the trees, while tiny, endemic Midget Flowerpeckers flitted about. Best of all was the modestly-plumaged Black-headed Myzomela that foraged quietly in a tall tree. This unobtrusive species is restricted to the island of Guadalcanal. We also encountered Superb Fruit Dove, Uniform Swiftlets, Oriental Dollarbird, an all to brief Finsch's Pygmy Parrot, Barred and White-bellied Cuckooshrikes, Solomons Monarch and Olive-backed Sunbird. We heard the mournful calls of Melanesian Megapode and the nervous voice of a Pale-vented Bush-hen. In the afternoon we revisited the Betikama area, where we spent a fair amount of time bashing the grassy areas trying to flush a Red-backed Buttonquail. Our very sweaty efforts sadly didn't pay off



A displaying pair of Steel-blue Flycatchers and Uniform Swiftlets enlivened our visit to Mount Austen (Mark Van Beirs)

though. We did find a distantly perched endemic Sanford's Sea Eagle which disappeared as we tried to get a bit closer. A Pied Goshawk flew past and an Australasian Swampphen sat up in the marsh. From the top of one of the low hills we scoped a splendidly lanky Buff-headed Coucal and several lovely Cardinal Lories. Lots of screaming Solomons Cockatoos were flying about and perched in the open treetops.

Our early morning flight to the island of Rennell was delayed for several hours, a not unusual phenomenon connected to Solomon Airlines... Some Greater Crested Terns, a couple of Indo-Pacific Bottle-nosed Dolphins and several Eurasian Tree Sparrows helped to soften the pain a bit. In mid-morning we finally flew south to this isolated patch of land far to the south. The makatea island of Rennell has a mainly Polynesian population and still holds lots of forest, although heavy logging has taken place recently. Upon arrival we were greeted by our host and transferred to our nearby guesthouse. We sure enjoyed our excellent introduction to the avian jewels of Rennell from the wide veranda, while waiting for our lunch. Several splendid, endemic Bare-eyed White-eyes were foraging in a nearby tree. These remarkable birds are very different looking white-eyes, belonging in the separate genus *Woodfordia*, which holds two species: one on Rennell and one which is restricted to the nearby Santa Cruz Islands (Temotu). Strident Song Parrots were regularly flying past and we scoped a perched yellow-headed male. A couple of dinghy-looking Sacred Kingfishers favoured the open areas near our accommodation. The Melanesian fieldguide specifically mentions this species doesn't occur on the island of Rennell... Our afternoon walk along a wide track through patches of good forest interspersed with more open areas gave us a splendid variety of specialities. Several Australian White Ibises (of the endemic subspecies *pygmaeus*) were foraging near the airstrip. A female Lesser Frigatebird flew high over and a couple of Brown Goshawks gave glimpses. The most common bird was the smart Silver-capped Fruit Dove which is virtually restricted to Rennell and showed so very well on several occasions. Pacific Imperial Pigeons were regularly noted and we often heard their lovely, very distinctive growl. Probably the most notable species of the afternoon was the endemic Rennell Shrikebill, which gave terrific views as it was feeding in the mid canopy. This special bird belongs in the genus *Clytorhynchus*, which holds five species, all restricted to the western Pacific. Other Rennell endemics

that showed very well included the curious, drab-coloured Rennell Fantail, the smart Rennell White-eye and the orange-eyed Rennell Starling at its nest hole. We heard and glimpsed a Shining Bronze Cuckoo and enjoyed scope views of a Pacific Kingfisher (a recent split in the Collared Kingfisher complex). Colourful Cardinal Myzomelas favoured the flowers of the coconut palms and tiny Fan-tailed Gerygones flitted through the undergrowth. Both of these more widespread species are restricted to the island of Rennell in the Solomon Islands. We saw several yellow-eyed Barred Cuckooshrikes and observed a flighty Melanesian Flycatcher. A couple of Island Thrushes showed all too briefly. Good numbers of impressive, tawny-coloured Pacific Flying-foxes were continuously plying the sky. As there are no nightbirds, nor other interesting nocturnal creatures on Rennell, we enjoyed a long night's sleep.



The lovely Bare-eyed White-eye is endemic to the island of Rennell (Josh Bergmark)

Just after dawn we found ourselves in a stretch of well-preserved primary forest listening to the loud, nightingale-like song of a couple of Rennell Whistlers. We tried to lure them to the track, but they didn't want to budge. We walked further along and some of us obtained decent views of a tiny Finsch's Pygmy Parrot. The suite of Rennell endemics showed very well again: Silver-capped Fruit Dove, Rennell Fantail, Rennell Shrikebill, Bare-eyed White-eye, Rennell White-eye and Rennell Starling performed at length. A Little Pied Cormorant (of the endemic Rennell race *brevicauda*) was trying to land in a clearing and a couple of Brown Goshawks gave great looks in flight. A Barred Cuckooshrike was found attending its nest. In mid-morning we returned to the whistler area and made our way into the forest scrambling over the rather treacherous,

uneven limestone forest floor. It didn't take too long to get splendid looks at the drably-coloured Rennell Whistler. This recent split in the Golden Whistler complex is a feminised taxon, in which the male looks like the modestly-plumaged female. Several Rennell Flying-foxes were noted foraging in the larger trees. They were smaller and less colourful than their more common, larger cousins, the Pacific Flying-foxes. After a rest in the afternoon we explored several other trails, which gave us more good looks at the local specialities. A Rennell Monitor was found and several lizards and geckos caught our attention. The relaxed, final hour of the day on the veranda produced excellent looks at a perched Brown Goshawk.



The cracking Rennell Shrikebill is the most distinctive Rennell endemic (Josh Bergmark)

On our last full day on Rennell we tried to plug the few holes that remained in the birdlist and succeeded! On our walks through the forest we again had great looks at most of the Rennell endemics. We finally managed to scope a singing Shining Bronze Cuckoo (of the endemic race *harterti*) and obtained good looks at several Finsch's Pygmy Parrots as they were clambering about in the treetops. The eye-ball to eye-ball views of male and female Song Parrot were much appreciated and a couple of Melanesian Flycatchers eventually

showed at length in the mid canopy. We had to work quite a bit to get good views of the rather shy Island Thrush. We had already glimpsed several birds flit across the track, but after having found some fruiting bushes with visiting MacKinlay's Cuckoo Doves and Bare-eyed White-eyes we managed to point our binoculars on these Eurasian Blackbird lookalikes. Rennell is one of the few islands that holds a lowland population of this very variable species of which no fewer than 48 subspecies have been described. The race on Rennell is *rennellianus*.



The Rennell Whistler is the hardest Rennell endemic (Josh Bergmark); the Fan-tailed Gerygone also occurs on Vanuatu and New Caledonia (Mark Van Beirs)

Our return flight to the hub of Honiara was once again a little late this morning. The short grass of the Rennell airstrip held our attention however, with a rare Oriental Pratincole and seven Pacific Golden Plovers, of which several were still in immaculate breeding plumage. While waiting to check in a White-faced Heron flew past. Both the heron and the pratincole were new birds for the Birdquest Solomon Islands list and both are considered as vagrants! An uneventful flight took us north to the island of Guadalcanal. The Twin Otter flew low over the mountains where the fabled Moustached Kingfisher and several other highland endemics occur... One day... maybe! In the afternoon we sorted out things and prepared ourselves for the hardships of the Makira highlands. A pre-dawn owling session on Mount Austen only produced some distant hoots of the Guadalcanal form of Solomons Boobook. After a scrumptious breakfast at our hotel we made our way to the domestic terminal and checked in for the flight to Kira Kira, the main town on the island of Makira (or San Cristobal). After some organizing we finally boarded a small truck and drove to the trail head. It was already mid-afternoon by the time we started our walk to the highlands of Makira. We more or less followed a fairly substantial river, first through cocoa plantations and later through nice secondary forest. We had to cross the river c12 times, but luckily a canoe was provided which made sure we could all cross without getting too wet. The river was often more than two metres deep, which would and could have caused some serious problems. It all took a bit more time than expected, so we had to walk the last stretch in the dark. We arrived at our well-built guesthouse in mid-evening and our spirits sure lifted when we saw the amazing variety of tasty dishes provided for dinner. Only a few birds showed on our walk, including a dark morph Pacific Reef Heron, several Common Kingfishers, here at the easternmost edge of their wide distribution, and a couple of Rufous Fantails.



We had to cross this river 12 times to get into the Makira highlands (tour participant Mark Tasker)



This Makira Dwarf Kingfisher showed very well; Chestnut-bellied Imperial Pigeons favour the canopy of montane forest (Josh Bergmark)

Early in the morning we started walking up into the highlands of Makira. We followed a well-laid out, but steep trail that took us to the top of a forested ridge, which we then followed up and up. A great selection of Makira endemics performed well. Fruiting trees held several, very smart White-headed Fruit Doves and Chestnut-bellied Imperial Pigeons. A Makira Dwarf Kingfisher was hunted down in the undergrowth and was uncharacteristically showy. Sooty Myzomelas and Mottled Flowerpeckers sat up for great looks while shy

Makira Honeyeaters played hide and seek at the forest edge. Several pairs of well-marked Makira Cicadabirds were noted and bird parties regularly held attractive White-collared Monarchs and Makira Flycatchers. Unobtrusive Makira Leaf Warblers flitted about high in the canopy and Makira Starlings perched up on dead boughs. A few lucky souls connected with a shy Makira Thrush. Other specialities included a magnificent Sanford's Sea Eagle that sailed low over us, a cracking Crested Cuckoo-Dove, enthralling Yellow-bibbed Fruit Doves in the scope, two families of Long-tailed Trillers, several Oriole Whistlers and some Grey-throated White-eyes. In late afternoon we arrived at our accommodation and were happily surprised by our newly built, richly decorated house where we all had our separate cubicles. Pure luxury! Another shy Makira Thrush was located in a nearby gully just before sunset.



Our house in the Makira highlands (Mark Van Beirs)

Long before dawn we were climbing to the top of the nearby well-forested ridge where we soon heard the distinctive calls of the Makira race of the Solomons Boobook. Sadly, the bird wasn't very responsive and kept its distance. After enjoying an alfresco breakfast we walked further up along the ridge and started to hear the loud pure whistles of the shy, endemic Shade Bush Warbler. It took a while to get everyone onto this unobtrusive and not very cooperative skulker. Several Makira Leaf Warblers showed well in the mid canopy, as did the restless Grey Fantails. We heard a couple of Makira Thrushes, but they characteristically kept in hiding. One lucky soul connected with a Pacific Robin. Best of all was the cracking Yellow-legged Pigeon that everyone eventually managed to see well high in the canopy. This attractive pigeon was regularly heard, but it took quite a while to see it well, due to the adverse rainy and misty weather. The very slippery descent from the hills in late afternoon was not really fun, so we were really glad to arrive sane and well at our lovely house. In the middle of the night most of us were woken by a pretty severe earthquake, which shook the house for quite a while and left us rather speechless.

On our last morning in the higher hills of Makira we explored the surroundings of the village and tried to get everybody views of the secretive Makira Thrush in various steep forested gullies. Some of us managed fair flight views, but we were still left rather frustrated. A pair of Duchess Lorikeets flew lightning fast past our house. After a filling breakfast we packed up and took the shorter route down to the village of Na'ara. The trail was muddy, slippery and at times quite treacherous. In a shady part of the valley we finally all manage good looks at an ultra-skulking Makira Thrush, after some considerable effort! Charles even managed to get a photo of this much wanted species. A Crested Cuckoo-Dove showed very well further along the trail. It then started raining seriously, so we just walked and walked. We arrived at Na'ara after midday and in

between the showers birded the football pitch. Some of us even joined the local youth on the field! It continued raining throughout the night, so our spotlighting hopes were sadly shattered.



The Crested Cuckoo-Dove is a marvellous species (Josh Bergmark)

We had planned to try again for Solomons Boobook before dawn, but continuous rain sabotaged our efforts. When the rain finally relented a bit, we explored a steep gully where our local guide had seen the boobook before, but luck was not on our side. After an early lunch we started our hike back to the trailhead on the coastal road. Rain kept us company all the time, but luckily the river crossings went quite smoothly, although the level of the river had risen considerably. The only species of note in the afternoon was a pair of Makira Fantails, which eventually showed quite well in their dense undergrowth habitat. Makira Dwarf Kingfishers were regularly recorded and several Buff-banded Rails were noted in flooded fields. We arrived at our humble hotel in Kira Kira in late afternoon.



The Sanford's Sea Eagle was one of the most wanted endemics (Mark Van Beirs)

After a very rainy night, we had a leisurely morning walking along the main road towards the airstrip. We had a splendid time with birds of prey as we had great looks at five different species. A couple of imposing Sanford's Sea Eagles sailed majestically past, two pairs of smart-looking Pacific Bazas allowed perfect scope views, an adult and an immature Pied Goshawk circled over the nearby forest, an Eastern Osprey lingered along the coast and a Brahminy Kite flapped lazily over the coconut palm plantations. Red-knobbed Imperial Pigeons and a gaudy pair of Eclectus Parrots could be admired in the scope and an Apple Fruit Tree (*Syzigium*) was visited by a dozen Sooty Myzomelas. Two Buff-banded Rails were bathing in a roadside puddle. After a filling lunch we got ready for the flight to Honiara, but we were then told that the flight had been cancelled and delayed till the following day, due to the Kira Kira airstrip being waterlogged. It kept raining intermittently throughout the afternoon, so we had a rather lazy time, catching up on sleep, checking our e-mails and just chatting away over some beers.



The widespread Pacific Baza is one of the more attractive birds of prey in the Solomon Islands (Josh Bergmark)

Although it rained a bit during the night, we received the happy news early in the morning that we would fly out of Makira around midday. Another stroll along the main track produced some excellent observations of attractively-patterned, endemic Pied Goshawks, both in flight and perched. We could even discern its red eye! Eastern Osprey and Pacific Baza showed well again and one lucky soul observed a small flock of Duchess Lorikeets in flight. It was then time to say goodbye to our gracious hosts Joseph and Dorish. Smooth connecting flights took us first to Honiara and then onwards to Gizo, the capital of the Western Island province. From the air we had great looks at the world famous azure-blue Marovo lagoon, a World Heritage Site. The short boat trip from the airstrip to Gizo town gave us three Whimbrel. We checked in into our waterfront hotel and celebrated our arrival with a tasty dinner and several ice cold SolBrews.

The island hopping day in the western province is always good fun. The sea was quite calm and the sky a bit overcast, so conditions were fairly comfortable. The birding started with a Sanford's Sea Eagle that we observed from the breakfast table. Our small boat took us along the northern shore of Gizo where imposing Beach Kingfishers and elegant Black-naped Terns performed. A sandy islet held a roost of dozens of Black Noddies together with some Brown Noddies, Greater Crested and Black-naped Terns and a Brown Booby. Nearby we found a relaxed pair of impressive Beach Stone-curlews. The sea crossing to the island of Ranongga sadly didn't yield any seabirds, except for some Lesser Frigatebirds and the landing on the beach at Ranongga turned out to be a rather wet affair due to strong wave action. A short walk in the nearby gardens soon produced excellent looks at the smart, endemic Ranongga White-eye, the nice Crimson-rumped Myzomela (endemic to the Western Islands) and Island Imperial Pigeon. The crossing of the narrow strait between Ranongga and Vella Lavella went smoothly and after lunch on the beach of a placid lagoon, where another pair of Beach Stone-curlews, Whimbrel and Striated Heron were scoped, we explored the nearby bush. We obtained very nice looks at an extremely attractive White-capped Monarch and eye-ball to eye-ball views of a ponderous Buff-headed Coucal, but not a sniff of the endemic white-eye was had. We moved to another area and after some searching finally heard the distinctive notes of our quarry. Two birds were hyperactively flitting about in the mid canopy, and unfortunately not everyone managed tickable views

of the endemic Vella Lavella White-eye. Definitely not the usual way! Nice Cardinal Lories and many Olive-backed Sunbirds were also about. We arrived back in Gizo after a smooth, but rather birdless boat trip.



Black Noddies, Great Crested and Black-naped Terns and a Brown Booby on an islet off Gizo (Mark Van Beirs)

An early morning outing in the bushy surroundings of Gizo town produced splendid looks at the exceedingly smart Gizo White-eye, definitely one of the better looking members of the Zosteropidae family. Everyone was able to discern the orange bill and legs, the black front and the bright yellow colours of this cutie. A family group of striking White-capped Monarchs passed by and fine-looking Claret-breasted Fruit Doves were enjoying the first rays of sun. After getting organized for our Kolombangara stay, we boarded our boat and headed towards our cozy guesthouse on the beach. We searched in vain for good seabird activity, but were only rewarded by good looks at a couple of Bridled Terns. We settled into our rustic accommodation and relaxed a bit during the hotter hours of the day. The afternoon walk through lowland forest and gardens gave us scope views of an exceedingly attractive, gaudy Duchess Lorikeet feeding on the flowers of a coconut palm. North Melanesian Cuckooshrikes obliged too, but try as we might, we couldn't find the Roviana Rails in the fields where we used to see them on every previous visit. There were more cats and dogs about and we were told several birds had been trapped, but still... A couple of Australasian Swampheens were strutting about and we flushed a Variable Goshawk off its snake prey. We had nice scope views of a perched Sanford's Sea Eagle, while dozens of White-rumped Swiftlets were foraging along the



The Gizo White-eye is considered Endangered (tour participant Charles Davies); a smart White-capped Monarch (Mark Van Beirs)

forest edge. Several Solomon Islands Flying-foxes appeared at dusk. It was the first night of the tour stars could be seen, so all augured well for our hike up the volcano!

We rose early and began what can only be described as a 15 km slog up the slope of the Kolombangara volcano. The first section passing through undulating lowland ravines proved to be slow birding, but we were treated to excellent views of the jewel-like New Georgia Dwarf Kingfisher, another species in the newly split Variable Kingfisher complex, with its distinguished bright red bill clearly visible even in the shadows. On reaching some good forest above 500m following lunch, a diverse feeding flock drew us in. Bright Solomons White-eyes stood out, while the more sombre Kolombangara White-eyes mainly avoided our binoculars. A pair of Grey-capped Cicadabirds moved through with a male Steel-blue Flycatcher, before right at the back a flash of black and white alerted us to a striking Kolombangara Monarch, which posed well in the end for all. With most of the lower altitude birds now in the bag, we climbed the remaining 500m to Camp Professor in earnest. Arriving with a few hours of daylight remaining, we were pleased to find camp already completed by the porters, and after giving sore legs a brief respite, our intrepid group continued up the trail in search of specialities. The weather was uncharacteristically clear and sunny however, which may have explained the relative lack of birds! We eventually enjoyed good views of the resident Oriole Whistler race, and then found three Solomons White-eyes at more than twice their supposed limiting altitude before heading back to the camp viewpoint. Meek's Lorikeets and Pale Mountain Pigeons performed as fly-bys amidst the abundant Duchess Lorikeet groups while we drank our beers and watched the sun set over distant Vella Lavella island. With a strong breeze picking up overnight, our pre-dawn start up towards the volcanic rim proved chilly, but at least dry. As the light improved we were already waiting at 1,400m altitude, where almost the first bird of the morning was the enigmatic Kolomobangara Leaf Warbler! This of course was the main reason for our expedition, and is probably best regarded as the hardest *Phylloscopus* warbler to access, should you be wanting a complete set! With high wind the bird kept low and obscured, so we continued upwards in order to obtain more views. However, with the track deteriorating and the wind becoming stronger, doubling back



Part of the group at Camp Professor high on Kolombangara volcano (Josh Bergmark)

down proved to be the winning move as a leaf warbler popped up and showed off for the whole group, allowing us to study its pale bill and smoky-green moss-coloured upperparts. Truly it is a good looking warbler, made all the better by the effort involved to see it! There were smiles all round as we made our way back down to camp, encountering more Kolombangara White-eyes, and an Island Thrush for some during the descent.

Still needing the rail, we pushed ourselves to the limit during the return hike, shaving off two hours and arriving back at Hambere well before dusk thanks to a monumental effort by all. Along the way, Mark T. managed to spot an Island Leaf Warbler of the distinct pallescens race tailing a mixed white-eye flock, but their rapid momentum saw the bird quickly vanish down a ridge. A refreshing dip in the lagoon at Hambere was followed by a brief wait at a newly staked-out local garden before two, endemic Roviana Rails appeared right on cue, and everybody was able to catch up with this curious flightless rail, which is seemingly doing quite well on Kolombangara despite persistent threats which often push other flightless island birds to breaking point. The waiting boat then sped us back to Gizo for a much-needed pizza, shower, and some air conditioning.

Several members of the party had opted to stay in the lowlands of Kolombangara, as we had warned everyone that the hike up to the habitat of the Kolombangara Leaf Warbler (at over 1,400m altitude) was truly brutal and only suitable for the fitter participants. One of the highlights of these two relaxed days was the fabulous Roviana Rail that allowed brilliant and unconcerned eye-ball to eye-ball looks behind the kitchen of our guesthouse, both at dusk and at dawn. The endearing, New Georgia endemic Solomons White-eye also showed very well in the nearby forest, where we also noted Grey-capped Cicadabirds, huge North Melanesian Cuckooshrikes and New Georgia endemic Crimson-rumped Myzomelas. Beach Kingfishers were regular visitors along the coast and a Common Sandpiper favoured the beach near our guesthouse. Cardinal Lories were pleasingly common and at dusk several Nankeen Night Herons appeared.



Attractive, displaying Black-naped Terns; a Common Sandpiper (Mark Van Beirs)

One big target remained – Heinroth's Shearwater. With the ocean being almost devoid of birds on previous outings, we elected to give it one last shot before our flight out with a quick 1,5 hour "pelagic". An efficient driver and speedboat saw us quickly whizzing past the infamous Kennedy Island towards the strait separating Gizo and Kolombangara, chasing every avian feeding congregation we could find. The activity was clearly higher today for whatever reason, and after a few tubenoseless flocks, two Heinroth's Shearwaters were spotted low to the water at the back of a group of noddies. Everybody quickly locked on to this very restricted tropical seabird, which is thought to breed inside the crater on Kolombangara, although no nest has ever been found. Back in Gizo ten minutes later, our luggage was loaded onto another boat and we transferred to the airport, wishing the Western Isles goodbye (after a short flight delay from SolAir, of course!). A smooth flight took us back to Honiara, where in the afternoon we relaxed and prepared ourselves for the delights of Santa Isabel.



It was only the second time ever that we managed to observe the rare White-eyed Starling (Mark Van Beirs)

Long before dawn we were listening to the growls of a couple of Solomons Boobooks in the hills behind Honiara, but, sadly, they were utterly unresponsive and stayed totally out of sight. We then walked along a well maintained logging road where an enormous fruiting tree caught our attention. A variety of species were flitting about, but best of all were three ultra-rare White-eyed Starlings that showed particularly well. We could admire the white eyes, heavy bills and swooping, elongated tails of these only very occasionally observed starlings, that are restricted to the islands of Bougainville, Choiseul, Rendova and Guadalcanal. This was only the second time ever we managed to see this species on a Birdquest tour! A couple of striking, endemic Solomons Cuckooshrikes were also recorded and we obtained good looks at a stationary Black-headed Myzomela. In late morning we flew north to the islet of Fera, on the north coast of the island of Santa Isabel. Upon arrival we were welcomed by our gentle, very helpful hosts, transferred to the main island and started to walk up the steep slope to the village of Tirotnoga. Two very sweaty hours later we arrived at our well-appointed, comfortable guesthouse, where we settled in and got organised for our five nights stay. In the early evening we walked to the edge of the village to try for the bizarre Solomons Frogmouth, but we had to be happy with a few distant calls.



We saw the White-billed Crow on Guadalcanal and on Santa Isabel (Josh Bergmark)

After a cool night and a tasty breakfast we started to explore the steep limestone hills and valleys in the neighbourhood of the village. We soon heard the distinctive double call of an endemic Black-faced Pitta and although it seemed interested and eventually approached us, it stayed totally out of sight. Several Yellow-throated White-eyes (endemic to Bougainville, Choiseul, Santa Isabel and the Florida Islands) were feeding in the mid canopy, while a party of White-billed Crows called like undisciplined football hooligans. In late morning our local guides took us to a nest tree of a Solomons Boobook on a hill at the edge of the village and soon we were able to observe one of these cuties peering out of its hole high up in a giant fig tree. After a rest in the middle of the day most of the party went hunting for Woodford's Rails. The rails didn't show, but two Ultramarine Kingfishers allowed excellent close up views of their finery. A very cooperative Finsch's Pygmy Parrot could be studied in detail. Another look at the Solomons Boobook showed it now sitting on an open branch in all its glory. After an early dinner we returned to the forest where soon after dusk, we heard the piercing call of a Solomons Frogmouth. Our local frogmouth expert imitated the bird perfectly and after some anxious waiting we were able to admire this totally bizarre, extraordinary creature sitting just a few metres away. Truly fantastic moments and definitely one of the highlights of the tour! This unusual-looking frogmouth used to be part of the Marbled Frogmouth complex, but research (and common sense) has shown that it belongs in its own genus. A happy group returned along a slippery trail to our guesthouse and on the way a sleeping North Solomons Dwarf Kingfisher was found on a twig above the path. A splendid extra bonus and a great ending of our first full day on Santa Isabel!



The Solomons Boobook showed well (Mark Van Beirs)

We hit the now well-known, narrow, slippery trails again at dawn and soon heard the characteristic song of a Black-faced Pitta emanate from a secluded gully. We tried different tactics to get to grips with this extremely shy skulker in the challenging, steep limestone terrain, but the endemic jewel kept its distance. In the course of the morning we heard two more singing birds, but they too didn't want to be seen, although one was glimpsed by Josh. A Red-capped Myzomela performed beautifully and a Solomons Monarch flitted past. A pair of Ultramarine Kingfishers posed beautifully in a dead palm. On the afternoon walk two more singing Black-faced Pittas were heard in virtually inaccessible terrain. An after dinner recce by the leaders of a nearby area produced a calling Fearful Owl!



Santa Isabel scenery (Mark Van Beirs)

Another day of exploring secluded valleys and rocky streambeds in the neighbourhood of the village didn't add anything to the birdlist. We scrambled over jagged limestone outcrops and climbed steep slopes to get closer to the pitta calls we heard in the distance, but they remained voices, sadly. An occupied eyrie of a Variable Goshawk was found. The afternoon was spent in a different valley, but nothing exciting was noted, except for some playful Solomons Cockatoos. After dinner the whole group walked to the Fearful Owl valley, and we got immediate response from a male and a female, but only managed a glimpse of this strangely named species. The very windy conditions obviously didn't help, but we were all impressed by the quavering excited yelp of this rare endemic.



A splendid, endemic Ultramarine Kingfisher; these Island Monarchs performed well on the islet of Fera (Josh Bergmark)

Another day of slogging along the steep, narrow, muddy and slippery trails trying to get to grips with the pitta didn't yield anything of note. We heard the pitta at two venues, but none of the birds showed any interest at all. We finally connected with the shy Solomons Monarch and had nice looks at an daunting Sanford's Sea

Eagle sailing overhead. After dinner and a heavy tropical shower we tried again for the Fearful Owl, but not a sniff was heard...

Pre-dawn we walked again to the owl area and sure enough, after some respectful waiting, the Fearful Owl called close by, but didn't really wanted to show itself in full. The bird was sitting low behind some big leaves and some of us managed to discern its silhouette. As soon as we shone the torch it flew off never to be seen again. And then it was time to leave the hospitable village of Tirotogna and we walked down to the coast. We sailed to the island of Fera, where we explored the coastline, the grassy airstrip and the mangroves. Several Island Monarchs showed beautifully and as soon as I played, rather casually, a few notes of the Pacific Long-tailed Cuckoo, one appeared over our heads and showed its very distinctive profile. Several Common Terns were foraging offshore. In the heat of the day we flew to Honiara, where we enjoyed the hot showers and the air conditioning.



The Moustached Treeswift is superbly elegant (Josh Bergmark)

A leisurely walk along a logging road leading through patches of secondary forest to the southwest of Honiara didn't add anything to the list, but was quite enjoyable. We obtained excellent views again of up to ten rarely-encountered White-eyed Starlings as they were frolicking in one of the remaining forest giants. A pair of Solomons Cuckooshrikes allowed scope views and both Variable and Pied Goshawks were seen circling over a nearby ridge. A Sanford's Sea Eagle sailed past and a Moustached Treeswift was discovered sitting on its diminutive nest. Ultramarine Kingfishers were regularly heard and one posed nicely for us. Several tiny Finsch's Pygmy Parrots zoomed past and very smart-looking Yellow-bibbed Lories could be admired at length. A couple of endemic Black-headed Myzomelas foraged quietly in dense epiphytes. In late morning we returned to Honiara and in the afternoon we took the short flight to Auki, the capital of the island of Malaita.

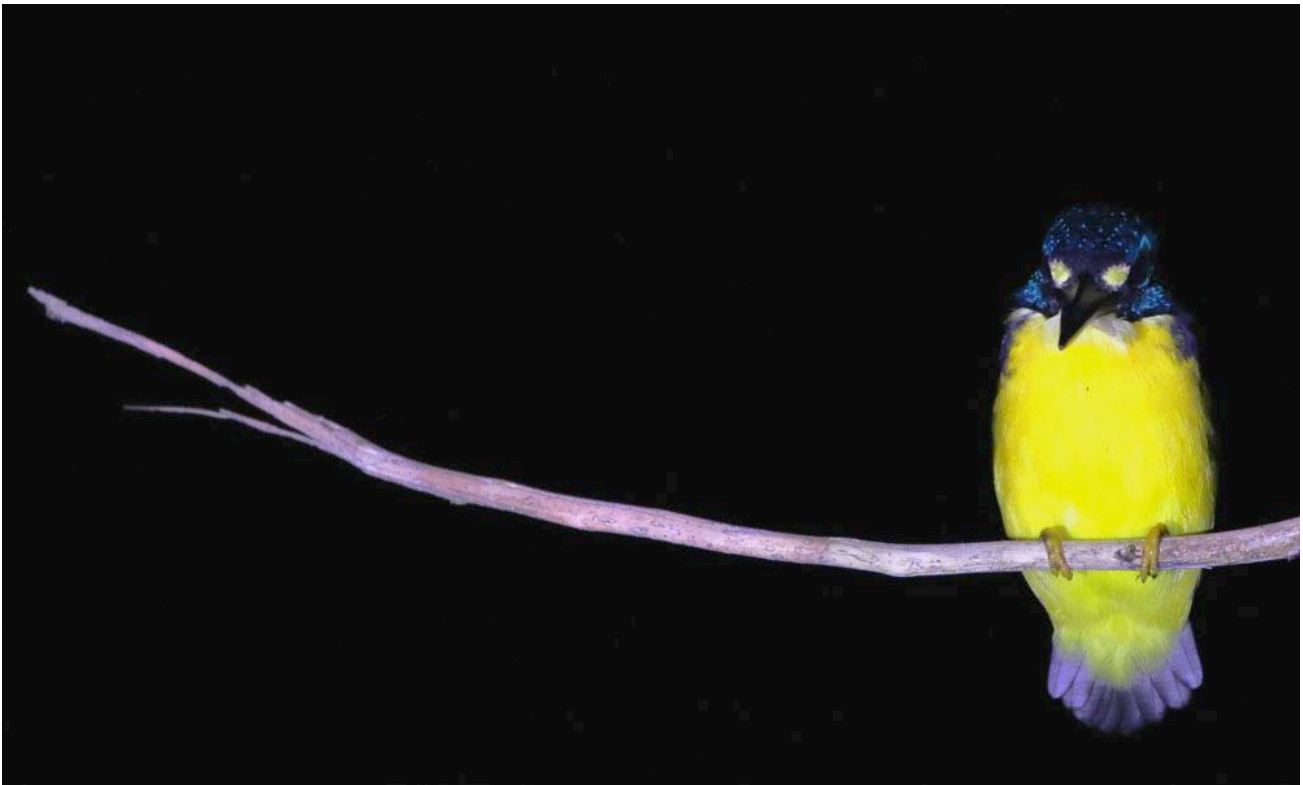
Early in the morning a Toyota Hilux took us along a sometimes quite rough track to a forested stretch along the trans island road. Soon after arriving we were observing several endemic Malaita White-eyes flitting about in the mid canopy. They looked more like leaf warblers than any of the other white-eyes we had seen in the Solomon Islands. This subtly-plumaged species was our tenth white-eye of the tour! A flowering acacia had attracted a female Red-vested Myzomela, another Malaita endemic. And then the trouble started.



Malaita scenery (Mark Van Beirs)

Although we had already paid the local landowner handsomely for access to his land, several other locals started to make quite a fuss about us being there and observing "their" birds. They were demanding exorbitant amounts of money in a rather aggressive way and soon it became apparent that talking wouldn't solve anything, so we left the area and returned to Auki for lunch. In the afternoon we patrolled the road near Auki in the hope of surprising a Woodford's Rail, but not a sniff was had of this scarce endemic. The sunny weather and the hordes of people on the road obviously didn't help.

On our last morning on Malaita we explored a track leading into the hills and found a nice stretch of decent forest at the edge of a friendly village. Another female Red-vested Myzomela foraged in an Apple Fruit Tree and several Malaita White-eyes were noted. A Sanford's Sea Eagle sailed over and a Solomons Cuckooshrike appeared. We enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere of the venue and in late morning returned to Auki. In the afternoon we flew to Honiara where the tour officially ended and we all went our separate ways. As most of us boarded the same international flight the following day, a splendid Sanford's Sea Eagle glided past and waved us goodbye.



This stunning North Solomons Dwarf Kingfisher was found at night (Josh Bergmark)

SYSTEMATIC LIST OF SPECIES RECORDED DURING THE TOUR

The species names and taxonomy used in the report mostly follows Gill, F & D Donsker (Eds). **IOC World Bird Names**. This list is updated several times annually and is available at <http://www.worldbirdnames.org>.

Species which were heard but not seen are indicated by the symbol (H).

Species which were only recorded by the leader are indicated by the symbol (LO).

Species which were not personally recorded by the leader are indicated by the symbol (NL).

Species marked with the diamond symbol (◊) are either endemic to the country or local region or considered 'special' birds for some other reason (e.g. it is only seen on one or two Birdquest tours; it is difficult to see across all or most of its range; the local form is endemic or restricted-range and may in future be treated as a full species).

Conservation threat categories and information are taken from *Threatened Birds of the World*, BirdLife International's magnificent book on the sad status of the rarest 10% of the world's avifauna, and updates on the BirdLife website: <http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/home>

EN = Endangered, **VU** = Vulnerable, **NT** = Near Threatened, **DD** = Data Deficient.

Pacific Black Duck *Anas superciliosa* A handful of observations of this subtly-plumaged duck.

Melanesian Megapode ◊ (**M Scrubfowl**) *Megapodius eremita* Regularly heard and seen well on a few occasions.

Heinroth's Shearwater ◊ *Puffinus heinrothi* **VU** Four birds were noted on the mini pelagic off Gizo. See Note.

Australian White Ibis *Threskiornis molucca* Fairly common on Rennell (the endemic race *pygmaeus*).

Black Bittern *Dupetor flavicollis* (LO) One bird was seen by Josh along the Mount Austen logging road.

Nankeen Night Heron (Rufous N H) *Nycticorax caledonicus* Two birds were seen along the Kolombangara coast.

Striated Heron *Butorides striata* Four observations in the Western Islands.

Great Egret *Ardea alba* A single bird was seen at the Betikama wetland.

Intermediate Egret *Ardea intermedia* Several were noted at the Betikama marsh.

White-faced Heron *Egretta novaehollandiae* This vagrant was seen well at the Rennell airstrip.

Pacific Reef Heron (P R Egret) *Egretta sacra* c10 sightings of this widespread species.



In the Solomon Islands the Australian White Ibis is only found on Rennell (Mark Van Beirs)

Great Frigatebird *Fregata minor* (NL) One was seen with Lesser Frigatebirds in the Western Islands.

Lesser Frigatebird *Fregata ariel* Regular observations of this kleptoparasite.

Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster* We saw small numbers on our boattrips in the Western Islands.

Little Pied Cormorant *Microcarbo melanoleucos* Several observations on Guadalcanal and Rennell.

Eastern Osprey *Pandion cristatus* Nine observations of this well-known piscivore.

Pacific Baza (Crested Hawk) *Aviceda subcristata* Several excellent encounters with this smart bird of prey.

Variable Goshawk *Accipiter hiogaster* A dozen observations on different islands.



A vagrant White-faced Heron; a Brown Goshawk from Rennell (Mark Van Beirs)

Brown Goshawk *Accipiter fasciatus* Excellent views of this widespread bird of prey on Rennell.

Pied Goshawk ♦ *Accipiter albogularis* Ten sightings of this beautiful, near endemic raptor.



An immature Pied Goshawk; the widespread Brahminy Kite (Mark Van Beirs)

Brahminy Kite *Haliastur indus* The most regularly encountered bird of prey.

Sanford's Sea Eagle ♦ *Haliaeetus sanfordi* **VU** No fewer than 19 sightings of this powerful endemic. See Note.

Woodford's Rail ♦ *Nesoclopeus woodfordi* (H) **NT** Sadly, this endemic was only briefly heard on Santa Isabel.

Buff-banded Rail *Gallirallus philippensis* Very nice looks at this widespread species on Makira.

Roviana Rail ♦ *Gallirallus roviae* **NT** Superb looks of this flightless endemic on Kolombangara. See Note.

Pale-vented Bush-hen *Amaurornis moluccana* (H) We heard the distinctive calls on Guadalcanal.

Australasian Swamphen *Porphyrio melanotus* Several very nice encounters. The local name is "red nose".

Beach Stone-curlew (B Thick-knee) *Esacus magnirostris* **NT** Excellent looks at two pairs on islets near Gizo.

Pacific Golden Plover *Pluvialis fulva* Small numbers were noted at several airstrips.

Whimbrel (Eurasian W) *Numenius [phaeopus] phaeopus* A few observations.

Grey-tailed Tattler *Tringa brevipes* (NL) **NT** One was seen at our Honiara hotel.

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos* A few encounters with this widespread wader.

Oriental Pratincole *Glareola maldivarum* This vagrant showed well at the Rennell airstrip.

Brown Noddy *Anous stolidus* Small numbers were seen in the Western Islands.

Black Noddy *Anous minutus* The most common seabird of the Solomon Islands, often found in flocks.

Greater Crested Tern (Great C T, Swift T) *Thalasseus bergii* Regular observations.

Bridled Tern *Onychoprion anaethetus* Some very nice encounters at sea in the Western Islands.

Black-naped Tern *Sterna sumatrana* Excellent looks at this very neat seabird off Gizo.

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo* Several birds were seen off Santa Isabel.

Yellow-legged Pigeon ♦ *Columba pallidiceps* **VU** Good looks for everyone high up in the hills of Makira.

MacKinlay's Cuckoo-Dove ♦ *Macropygia mackinlayi* Regular encounters with this "tramp" species.

Crested Cuckoo-Dove ♦ *Reinwardtoena crassirostris* **NT** Good views in the Makira hills. Also heard on Malaita.

Stephan's Emerald Dove *Chalcophaps stephani* Regular encounters.

Bronze Ground Dove *Alopecoenas beccarii* (H) We heard its distinctive voice on Kolombangara.

Superb Fruit Dove *Ptilinopus superbus* Several nice observations of this widespread marvel.

Silver-capped Fruit Dove ♦ *Ptilinopus richardsii* *Common and showy on Rennell.*

Yellow-bibbed Fruit Dove ♦ *Ptilinopus solomonensis* Several nice observations of this beauty.

Claret-breasted Fruit Dove ♦ *Ptilinopus viridis* Common and very good looking.

White-headed Fruit Dove ♦ *Ptilinopus eugeniae* **NT** Several nice observations on Makira to which it is endemic.

Pacific Imperial Pigeon *Ducula pacifica* Quite common on Rennell.

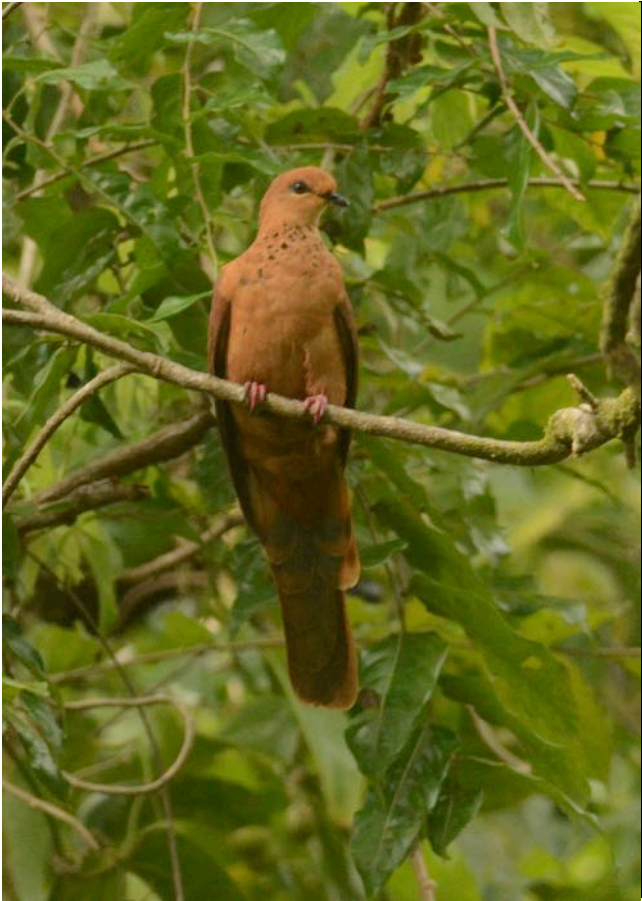
Red-knobbed Imperial Pigeon ♦ *Ducula rubricera* **NT** This beautiful Melanesian endemic was seen throughout.

Island Imperial Pigeon ♦ *Ducula pistrinaria* Regular observations, usually on smaller islands.

Chestnut-bellied Imperial Pigeon ♦ *Ducula brenchleyi* **VU** Scope views of several in the Makira highlands.

Pale Mountain Pigeon ♦ *Gymnophaps solomonensis* Flight views only high on Kolombangara.

Buff-headed Coucal ♦ *Centropus milo* Cracking looks at this vocal bird. See Note.



MacKinlay's Cuckoo-Dove (Mark Van Beirs); a Silver-capped Fruit Dove (Josh Bergmark)

- Pacific Koel** *Eudynamis orientalis* (H) We heard its distinctive voice on most islands.
- Pacific Long-tailed Cuckoo** ♦ (L-t Koel) *Urodynamis taitensis* Nice looks on Fera off Santa Isabel. See Note.
- Shining Bronze Cuckoo** *Chrysococcyx lucidus* Very nice scope looks on Rennell.
- Brush Cuckoo** *Cacomantis variolosus* Regularly heard. Seen well on Vella Lavella.
- Solomons Boobook** ♦ *Ninox jacquinoti* Great looks on Santa Isabel. Heard on Makira and Guadalcanal.
- Fearful Owl** ♦ *Nesasio solomonensis* VU Frustrating glimpse on Santa Isabel. A great voice!
- Solomons Frogmouth** ♦ (S Islands F) *Rigidipenna inexpectata* NT A fantastic encounter on Santa Isabel. See Note.
- Moustached Treeswift** *Hemiprocne mystacea* Regular and so very elegant. Also on a nest.
- Glossy Swiftlet** *Collocalia esculenta* Commonly seen on all the islands.
- White-rumped Swiftlet** ♦ *Aerodramus spodiopygius* Common in one area on Kolombangara.
- Uniform Swiftlet** *Aerodramus vanikorensis* More common than Glossy Swiftlet. Different flight.
- Oriental Dollarbird** *Eurystomus orientalis* Regular. Showy and quite vocal.
- Ultramarine Kingfisher** ♦ *Todiramphus leucopygius* Splendid studies on Santa Isabel and Guadalcanal.
- Melanesian Kingfisher** ♦ *Todiramphus tristrami* Seen on Guadalcanal, Santa Isabel and in the west. See Note.
- Pacific Kingfisher** ♦ *Todiramphus sacer* Recorded on Rennell and Makira. See Note
- Beach Kingfisher** *Todiramphus saurophagus* Several very nice sightings of this impressive species.
- Sacred Kingfisher** *Todiramphus sanctus* Regular and easy to see.
- Common Kingfisher** *Alcedo atthis* Several nice observations of the race *salomonensis*.
- North Solomons Dwarf Kingfisher** ♦ *Ceyx meeki* This beauty was found on its roost at night. Marvelous!
- New Georgia Dwarf Kingfisher** ♦ *Ceyx collectoris* Cracking views in the lowlands of Kolombangara.
- Makira Dwarf Kingfisher** ♦ *Ceyx gentianus* NT Several showed very well in the Makira lowlands.
- Blyth's Hornbill** (Papuan H) *Rhyticeros plicatus* Fairly regular. Still hunted on several islands.
- Australian Hobby** *Falco longipennis* Perfect scope views of a perched bird near Honiara. A vagrant.
- Solomons Cockatoo** ♦ *Cacatua ducorpsi* This endemic is still delightfully common.
- Finsch's Pygmy Parrot** ♦ *Micropsitta finschii* Several very nice observations of this tiny species.
- Eclectus Parrot** *Eclectus roratus* Regular, showy and noisy. A truly splendid species.



The Claret-breasted Fruit Dove is pure eye candy (tour participant Mark Tasker)

- Song Parrot** ♦ (Singing P) *Geoffroyus heteroclitus* Fantastic views on Rennell.
- Meek's Lorikeet** ♦ *Charmosyna meeki* NT A handful were seen in flight, high on Kolombangara. See Note.
- Duchess Lorikeet** ♦ *Charmosyna margarethae* NT Several encounters. Scope views of a perched bird! See Note.
- Yellow-bibbed Lory** ♦ *Lorius chlorocercus* Many glorious observations of this smart endemic.
- Cardinal Lory** ♦ *Pseudeos cardinalis* A common and noisy endemic. Usually seen in small flocks.
- Coconut Lorikeet** *Trichoglossus haematodus* Regular in small numbers.
- Black-faced Pitta** ♦ *Pitta anerythra* VU The most frustrating bird of the tour. Heard by all. Glimpsed by Josh. See Note
- Cardinal Myzomela** ♦ *Myzomela cardinalis* Common on Rennell and in the Makira lowlands.
- Red-capped Myzomela** ♦ (Scarlet-naped M) *Myzomela lafargei* Just a single sighting on Santa Isabel.
- Crimson-rumped Myzomela** ♦ (Yellow-vented M) *Myzomela eichhorni* Regular in the Western Islands.
- Red-vested Myzomela** ♦ (Red-bellied M) *Myzomela malaitae* NT Two females performed well. Endemic to Malaita.
- Black-headed Myzomela** ♦ *Myzomela melanocephala* Several very nice observations on Guadalcanal.
- Sooty Myzomela** ♦ *Myzomela tristrami* Good numbers were seen on Makira, to which it is endemic.
- Makira Honeyeater** ♦ (San Cristobal Melidectes) *Meliarchus sclateri* Regular, but shy in the Makira hills.
- Fan-tailed Gerygone** ♦ *Gerygone flavolateralis* Commonly encountered on Rennell.
- North Melanesian Cuckooshrike** ♦ *Coracina welchmani* Very nice observations on Kolombangara.
- Barred Cuckooshrike (Barred C)** *Coracina lineata* This widespread species was regular all along our route.
- White-bellied Cuckooshrike** *Coracina papuensis* Fairly common in open habitats.
- Grey-capped Cicadabird** ♦ *Coracina remota* Small numbers were noted on several islands. Unobtrusive.
- Makira Cicadabird** ♦ *Coracina salomonis* A handful of sightings in the Makira hills. Endemic to Makira.
- Solomons Cuckooshrike** ♦ *Coracina holopolia* NT This smart species showed well on Guadalcanal and Malaita.
- Long-tailed Triller** ♦ *Lalage leucopyga* Small numbers were observed on Makira.
- Oriole Whistler** ♦ *Pachycephala orioloides* Regular sightings. More often heard than seen.
- Rennell Whistler** ♦ *Pachycephala feminina* NT Perfect views, after a bit of scrambling of this Rennell endemic.
- Spangled Drongo** *Dicrurus bracteatus* (H) We heard its distinctive voice in the Makira hills.



Endemic Cockerell's and Rennell Fantails (Josh Bergmark)

Willie Wagtail *Rhipidura leucophrys* Common and endearing. A great name!

Cockerell's Fantail ♦ (White-winged F) *Rhipidura cockerelli* We only saw this cutie on the island of Ranongga.

Grey Fantail *Rhipidura albiscapa* A handful of observations in the Makira hills.

Makira Fantail ♦ (Dusky F) *Rhipidura tenebrosa* NT This unassuming endemic was seen in the Makira hills.

Rennell Fantail ♦ *Rhipidura rennelliana* Common and friendly in the Rennell forests.

Rufous Fantail *Rhipidura rufifrons* Regular, but more often heard than seen.

Rennell Shrikebill ♦ *Clytorhynchus hamlini* The pride of Rennell! This cracker showed ever so well.

Solomons Monarch ♦ (Black-and-white M) *Symposiachrus barbatus* NT This endemic was seen on two islands.

Kolombangara Monarch ♦ *Symposiachrus browni* NT A few were noted high up on Kolombangara.

White-collared Monarch ♦ *Symposiachrus vidua* This Makira endemic showed well on several occasions.

Island Monarch ♦ *Monarcha cinerascens* Excellent views of up to eight birds together. |

Chestnut-bellied Monarch ♦ *Monarcha castaneiventris* Regular encounters. A real beauty.



Chestnut-bellied Monarch (Mark Van Beirs); Rennell White-eye (Josh Bergmark)



The very attractive White-capped Monarch (Josh Bergmark)

White-capped Monarch ♦ *Monarcha richardsii* This smart species was quite common in the Western Islands.

Steel-blue Flycatcher ♦ *Myiagra ferrocyanea* Regular in small numbers, except on Rennell and Makira.

Makira Flycatcher ♦ *Myiagra cervinicauda* NT A handful of observations of this Makira endemic.

Melanesian Flycatcher ♦ (New Caledonian F) *Myiagra caledonica* Several nice sightings on Rennell.

White-billed Crow ♦ (Guadalcanal C) *Corvus woodfordi* Great looks on Santa Isabel and Guadalcanal.

Pacific Robin ♦ *Petroica pusilla* (NL) One was seen by a lucky soul high on Kolombangara.

Pacific Swallow *Hirundo tahitica* Small numbers were seen all along our route.

Shade Bush Warbler ♦ *Horornis parens* Good looks at this uncooperative species in the Makira hills.

Island Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus maforensis* (NL) One was seen halfway up Kolombangara volcano.

Makira Leaf Warbler ♦ (San Cristobal L W) *Phylloscopus makirensis* Several showed well in the Makira hills.

Kolombangara Leaf Warbler ♦ *Phylloscopus amoenus* VU Two observations of this speciality high on the volcano.

Bare-eyed White-eye ♦ *Woodfordia superciliosa* Delightfully common on Rennell, to which it is endemic.

Yellow-throated White-eye ♦ *Zosterops metcalfii* Common on Santa Isabel.

Rennell White-eye ♦ *Zosterops rennellianus* This lovely endemic was easy to see on Rennell.

Vella Lavella White-eye ♦ (Banded W-e) *Zosterops vellalavella* NT It took some effort to observe this species.

Gizo White-eye ♦ (Splendid W-e) *Zosterops luteirostris* EN Close up views of this beauty. See Note.

Ranongga White-eye ♦ (Ganongga W-e) *Zosterops splendidus* VU Excellent looks at this speciality.

Solomons White-eye ♦ *Zosterops kulambangrae* Small numbers were observed on Kolombangara.

Kolombangara White-eye ♦ (Kulambangra W-e) *Zosterops murphyi* Several fast flocks were seen high up.

Grey-throated White-eye ♦ *Zosterops rendovae* Small numbers showed well in the Makira hills.

Malaita White-eye ♦ *Zosterops stresemanni* Several of these endemics were quite cooperative in the Malaita bush.



An immature Metallic Starling (Mark Van Beirs); Rennell Starling (Josh Bergmark)

Metallic Starling *Aplonis metallica* Common and obvious all along our route.

Singing Starling *Aplonis cantoroides* Much less common than previous species, but regularly seen.

Rennell Starling ♦ *Aplonis insularis* This endemic was quite common on Rennell.

White-eyed Starling ♦ *Aplonis brunneicapillus* EN Small numbers seen well on Guadalcanal. A very nice surprise!

Brown-winged Starling ♦ *Aplonis grandis* Regular sightings on several islands.



A Midget Flowerpecker (Josh Bergmark); the widespread Olive-backed Sunbird (Mark Van Beirs)

Makira Starling ♦ (San Cristobal S) *Aplonis dichroa* This endemic was fairly common on Makira.

Long-tailed Myna ♦ *Mino kreffti* Many excellent sightings of this Melanesian speciality.

Common Myna (introduced) *Acridotheres tristis* Very common on Guadalcanal.

Makira Thrush ♦ (San Cristobal T) *Zoothera margaretae* NT This shy Makira endemic showed surprisingly well to all.

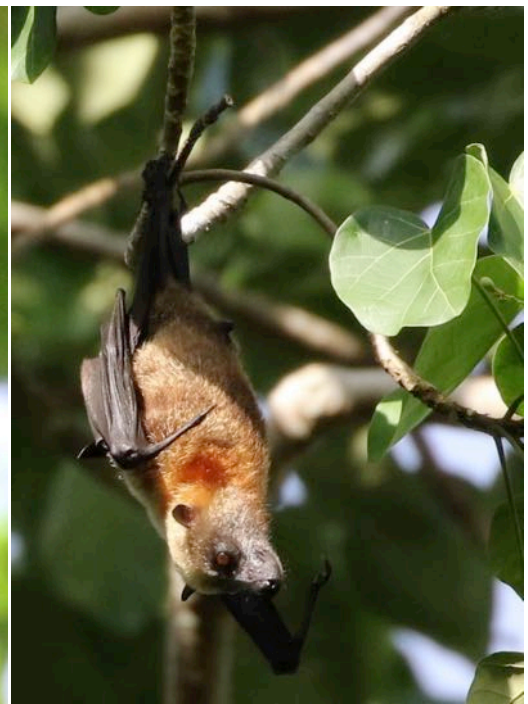
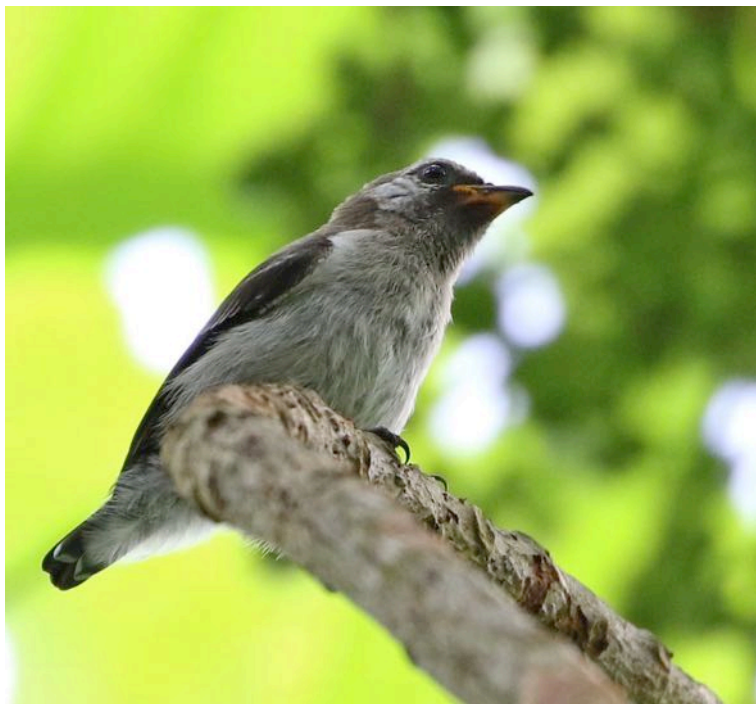
Island Thrush *Turdus poliocephalus* We saw a few on Rennell and one was noted high up on Kolombangara.

Midget Flowerpecker ♦ *Dicaeum aeneum* Regular observations of this cutie on several islands.

Mottled Flowerpecker ♦ *Dicaeum tristrani* This Makira endemic was not uncommonly encountered.

Olive-backed Sunbird *Cinnyris jugularis* This widespread species was seen quite commonly along our itinerary.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus* We saw this well-known species now and then in Honiara (Guadalcanal).



A Mottled Flowerpecker; Rennell Flying-fox (Josh Bergmark)

MAMMALS

Brown Rat *Rattus norvegicus* (NL) One was seen on Gizo.

Solomons Islands Flying-fox *Pteropus rayneri* Regular on Kolombangara.

Rennell Flying-fox *Pteropus rennelli* A few were identified on Rennell.

Pacific Flying-fox *Pteropus tonganus* Common and very obvious on Rennell.

Indo-Pacific Bottle-nosed Dolphin *Tursiops aduncus* Two were observed from the Honiara waterfront.

Wild Boar (introduced) *Sus scrofa* Several impressive animals were encountered on Vella Lavella.



Makira scenery (Mark Van Beirs)

NOTES TO THE SYSTEMATIC LIST

Heinroth's Shearwater *Puffinus heinrothi*

Fair, but all too brief views of several birds on one of our boat trips off Gizo (Western Province). This rarely recorded species is only known from the Solomon Islands and the seas surrounding New Britain (Bismarck Archipelago) and Bougainville (Papua New Guinea). No nest has ever been found, but it is presumed to breed in the mountains of these islands. The total population is estimated at between 350 and 1,500 birds. The species is named after Oskar Heinroth (1871–1945), German zoologist, collector in the Pacific and author.

Sanford's Sea Eagle *Haliaeetus sanfordi*

Although similar in plumage to a juvenile White-bellied Sea Eagle (and originally classified as this species), this bird of prey ranges far inland over forested mountains. It is classified as 'Vulnerable' by BirdLife/IUCN on the basis of its low population density, ongoing forest and coastal degradation, and occasional hunting. It is endemic to the Solomons Islands and the island of Bougainville (Papua New Guinea). The scientific epithet refers to Leland Cutler Sanford (1868–1950), a US zoologist.

Roviana Rail *Gallirallus rovianae*

We managed great looks at one feeding in a garden on Kolombangara. This is an extremely poorly-known, flightless species which was only described in 1991. It is endemic to Kolombangara, New Georgia and adjacent islets in the Western Province and is named after the small island of Roviana.

Buff-headed Coucal *Centropus milo*

This huge cuckoo showed very well on Guadalcanal, Vella Lavella and Kolombangara. Its loud swearing calls lend credence to the story that invading head-hunters from Malaita were just too scared to land on Vella Lavella, home to such intimidating beasts, and paddled back home! It is endemic to the Kolombangara group (Western Province) and Guadalcanal. The scientific epithet refers to Milo, a 5th century BC giant Greek athlete.



Buff-headed Coucal (Mark Van Beirs)

Solomons Frogmouth *Rigidipenna inexpectata*

Exquisite views of this bizarre-looking bird near Tirotonga village on Santa Isabel. This Solomons taxon is extremely poorly-known and is endemic to the islands of Bougainville, Choiseul and Santa Isabel. It used to be considered as a subspecies of Marbled Frogmouth *Podargus ocellatus*, but recent studies found it different enough to warrant its own separate genus. If you want to know more, read the following, recently published article: Nigel Cleere, Andrew W. Kratter, David W. Steadman, Michael J. Braun, Christopher J. Huddleston, Christopher E. Filardi, Guy Dutson (2007): "A new genus of frogmouth (Podargidae) from the Solomon Islands - results from a taxonomic review of *Podargus ocellatus inexpectatus* Hartert 1901" (Ibis 149 (2), 271–286).



Vella Lavella scenery (Mark Van Beirs)

Pacific Kingfisher *Todiramphus sacer* and **Melanesian Kingfisher** *Todiramphus tristrami*
These are recent splits in the Collared Kingfisher *T. chloris* complex.



A Pacific Kingfisher on Rennell (Josh Bergmark)

Meek's Lorikeet *Charmosyna meeki*

These tiny lorikeets were seen at the camp high up on Kolombangara. This unobtrusive species is endemic to the mountainous islands of the Solomons (including Bougainville). Albert Meek (1871-1943) was an English explorer and collector in New Guinea, the Solomons and Australia. His book "A Naturalist in Cannibal Land" provides some interesting reading.

Duchess Lorikeet *Charmosyna margarethae*

Another localized Solomons montane endemic, of which we obtained very good scope views of a perched bird in the lowlands of Kolombangara. An attractive but rather elusive species. The bird is named after Princess Louise Margaret Alexandra Victoria Agnes (1860-1917), Duchess of Connaught.

Black-faced Pitta *Pitta anerythra*

We heard up to five a day near the village of Tirotonga on Santa Isabel. Since 1938, it has only been recorded at Tirotonga, where Dave Gibbs rediscovered it in 1994 and only a handful of people have ever seen it. It is widely considered as one of the shyest and hardest to see of the 42 species of the wonderful Pitta family. It is classified as 'Vulnerable' by BirdLife/IUCN because of its rarity, and it is endemic to the islands of Bougainville, Choiseul and Santa Isabel.



Gizo White-eye (Josh Bergmark)

Gizo White-eye (Splendid W-e) *Zosterops luteirostris*

This is one the most threatened species we saw on the tour. Great looks at this striking species at the edge of Gizo town. The total population is in the range of 350-1,500 birds only and is steadily declining through habitat loss.

BIRD OF THE TRIP

1 Solomons Frogmouth	23 points
2 North Solomons Dwarf Kingfisher	12
3 Solomons Sea Eagle	9
White-capped Monarch	9
5 Yellow-legged Pigeon	8



Rennell scenery (tour participant Mark Tasker)