

# BIRDWATCHING ON UPOLU, SAMOA – JANUARY 2009

Petri Hottola (Finland)



The following notes will provide some up-to-date information for bird tourists visiting Upolu, the main island of Samoa, Central Pacific. The information was collected during a one week visit, 21<sup>st</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup>, in January 2009. The main emphasis in the report will be on endemic bird species, sites and travel arrangements. A number of photographs have been included to illustrate some of the locations and bird species seen on the island. T refers to Samoan tala, the local currency. The euro sums refer to the exchange rate at the time of the visit.

Birding is relatively easy in Upolu. For most of the endemic and other interesting land birds the main problem is to try to not to see them too fast. One could record them in a single day. Having said that, spotting all the species requires a visit to proper forest habitat. There is still primary forest left on Upolu, even though it is increasingly fragmented, but reaching the forest is another matter. As soon as a new road is opened, the trees tend to be cleared off and pastures with introduced mynas replace the original habitats. Instead of watershed conservation, the government appears to advocate even more intensive farming on high mountain slopes. Therefore, bird tourists need to find out where forest birding is still possible, in a place accessible by a car.

The two main exceptions of the general rule are the **Samoan White-eye**, which is seen only on the upper slopes of the island of Savaii, where a two-day hike is the option for those who are fit and eager enough to go for it. The other species is the enigmatic **Tooth-billed Pigeon**, which appears to be close to extinction, apparently as a consequence of uncontrolled pigeon hunting and habitat destruction. There may be a few in the mountain forests of Savaii (and Upolu?), but as Internet information testifies, a week or two of camping in the best forests may not be enough to actually see one. The remaining birds may fly down to the coastal forests to feed, as they have apparently been seen to do by the northern lava flow some years ago, but one apparently needs to be incredibly lucky to be in the right spot at the right time. Good luck if you decide to visit Savaii, and do some exploration!

In Upolu, the **Tooth-billed Pigeon** used to be widespread few decades ago. More recently, it has been recorded on the Nu'utele Island and around the Afulilo Dam, but there are no recent published records in the Internet. One may go to Nu'utele by boat, it is a short distance from the nearest village (Lalomanu), but the slopes are steep and chances of seeing one close to zero. The roads around the dam, on the other hand, were gated in January 2009, and the site could not be visited at all. The forests around the Afulilo Dam

were damaged by a cyclone years ago. All in all, there has been no reliable site for the species for a decade and as not much appears to be done to save the national bird of Samoa, the most unique of its species apparently has a rather bleak future.

Another interesting even though not endemic species is the **Shy Ground-Dove**. I could not find any information on easy to reach locations to try to see one. The best site appears to be the island of Nu'utele, but considering the arrangements required, one may have it easier to try to locate the species on some other Polynesian Island (e.g. Fiji), or on Savaii, as a part of a trekking expedition to see the two difficult species.

I stayed on Upolu for one week. In retrospect, this was too long but the plan was also to rest in Samoa, in between more hectic destinations (PNG, Fiji, Kauai) on a one month+ around-the-world tour. Samoa certainly is the place to relax and take it easy. Contrary to some mistaken rumors, the extra days were not (I repeat not) spent on an alley next to Aggie Grey's, stalking for the 'terribly busty' Aussie babes, who were recorded there in 2000 by Craig Faanes. The buxom babes have since become a target of desperate relocation efforts by a number of birding visitors, apparently eager to measure the accuracy of 'terribly' in this particular identification challenge. I can, however, confirm that the babes had not returned in January 2009 (sigh...), as I had to visit Aggie Grey's for other, completely unconnected reasons. Thank you Craig for the birding information!

## SEASON

Any season appears to be good for Samoa, the main difference being the variety of wintering shorebirds and visiting seabirds. The endemic birds are there year around and are relatively easy to locate, with the above-mentioned exceptions, also after the breeding season. January is in the middle of the so called hurricane season, when severe storms may occur, but exceptionally not in 2008-2009. The 'neighboring' (quite a distance) Fiji had serious floods in January (partly caused by unsustainable land-clearing), but Samoa had no exceptional weather. During the week I stayed there, two days were rather rainy, making birdwatching difficult on one side of the island, the other side being sunny and clear. Otherwise, only short afternoon showers.

## CAR RENTAL

Do not expect to find car rental services on arrival at the Faleola International Airport. I did, and had to wait for sunrise after my Air Pacific night flight from Nadi, before taking a taxi to the centre (T50, €12,50). It is best to reserve the car beforehand and have it delivered at the airport. Budget Samoa kindly offered me a breakfast and a selection of cars early in the morning, after I had woken up the manager, a very hospitable and resourceful lady, around 5.30 AM by calling the Budget 24 h number.

My choice was Hyundai Tucson, a spacious and sturdy car suitable also for dirt roads, for 145 tala (€40) per day for 8 days, everything except petrol included. Smaller models were around T125 per day. There are several other car rental companies on the island, but no significant difference between the rates, unless you look for a complementary large pizza (see Fig. 2)! The roads were in general quite fine, with fresh tarmac and seldom potholed – much better than in Fiji. Petrol was available seven days a week, in Apia.



**Fig 1.** A Budget Hyundai Tucson at Cloud 9; not a bad choice for a birding visitor.

A temporary driving permit is required for driving in Samoa, and this was easily collected by visiting a well-signed counter few hundred meters towards the Mulinuu Point. The office opened around 8 AM, if I remember correctly, and the license cost T12. Just bring money and your original driving license. Mine was in Finnish, Swedish and French, and was accepted. The clerk wrote down my home nation as 'Körkort', after checking the document : ) (For those who do not speak Swedish, that's 'driving license' in Swedish!) Petrol was surprisingly cheap by European standards for such an isolated location, around 50 eurocents per liter. I had bought a HEMA road map beforehand from Amazon.com and it proved to be both accurate and adequate. Upolu is a small island with a limited number of roads. The most complicated location is Apia, the capital, but learning its streets does not take more than an hour or two.



**Fig 2.** Rent a car at Vanilla Car Rental and get a large pizza free! I wonder how to define 'free' in this case... Poster at Faleola International Airport.



**Fig 3.** Rainy day in the southwest, with a typical coastal tarmac road. Villages are everywhere and one needs to drive slowly.

## **MONEY**

Whatever you do, do not change Samoan talas at airport Anzac banks on your way to Samoa! They say their commission is 5% but if you check the exceptionally poor exchange rates out, you will find that it is actually about 25% = highway robbery. I brought cash in euros, yens and U.S. dollars, and they could conveniently be changed at the Faleola airport, for a fair rate. The best way is, however, a credit card and the ATMs of the Apia CBD. Westpac has an especially convenient place to get the money, several ATMs and a spacious customer parking in the back of the building, along the back street parallel to the Main Beach Road with a roundabout. The back street parking lot is also a good place to buy the daily newspaper, with interesting insights into the life of the Samoans.

## **ACCOMMODATION AND MEALS**

On a small island there really is no need to stay in several places, if one has a vehicle to drive around. I spent all of my seven nights at the well known Cloud 9 Eco-Lodge, Dave Parker's place. The lodge had one of the best sceneries I have seen, with great views to a birdy primary forest valley, and all the way to the sea beyond the town of Apia. It is a great place for observations with a telescope and bird photography, particularly for flight photographs. There are two wide verandas with shelter, chairs and tables, from where observations can also be made in a rainy weather, the best time being late afternoon, between 4 and 7 PM. Food and drinks are available on request.

One should reserve rooms beforehand, a fact repeated on signs along the approach road, but do not worry if you are a foreign visitor without a reservation. Either contact their office in Apia, or drive straight in and you will not be turned down as long as there is space. During the hurricane season, the time of my visit, I had the place mostly for myself. In January 2009, they charged T90 (€22,50) per night, including a breakfast, in my case oftentimes a take-away one. I also had my dinners there, for T24 (€5,50). The young lady who was in charge of the services had a great voice and likes to sing Samoan songs while cooking.

There is a variety of accommodation in Apia, but clearly not quite as good deals (quality/price) as Cloud 9, even if you do not take the peaceful, secure location and birdwatching opportunities into account. Apia also has good restaurants and a selection of fast food joints. More importantly, its supermarkets and market place are well stocked, with a good variety of drinks, snacks and bakery products for reasonable prices. I brought my lunches and extra treats there. Among the larger supermarkets, Farmer Joe's is open also on Sundays. Do not miss buying some fresh Samoan cocoa, available at most supermarkets.



**Fig 4.** Do not mind the 'welcoming' signs but proceed to Cloud 9.



**Fig 5.** Part of the Cloud 9 view, Apia in the background.

## BIRDING SITES

### CLOUD 9

Almost every afternoon, I spent the last hours of the day on the Cloud 9 veranda, scanning the valley below, and sky between the lodge and the coast. Especially towards sunset, dove, pigeon and starling traffic was busy, becoming mixed with hundreds or up to two thousand 'flying-foxes' by sunset (**Samoan and Tongan**). Some larger trees close by had roosting fruit-bats also during the day, not to mention a good variety of birdlife. **Pacific Pigeons**, **Purple-capped** and **Many-colored** (the most numerous species) **Fruit-Pigeons** gave great views any time of the day. **Flat-billed Kingfishers** had a territory at the lodge yard, and were once visited by a **Samoan Flycatcher**. The treetops had **Samoan Fantails**, **Samoan Whistlers** (twice), **Polynesian** and **Samoan** (once) **Trillers**. Numerous **Samoan Starlings** and **Cardinal Myzomelas** were seen from the veranda. Once, a lone **Mao** was observed. **Samoan Wattled Honeyeaters** were almost as common as the **Samoan Starlings**, and one to five **Polynesian Starlings** were present every day.



**Fig 6.** There is some proper primary forest right below Cloud 9. Mulinu Point and sand bars in the background, with the orange dome of the Parliament House.



**Fig 7. White Terns** in rain, Cloud 9, with a pocket camera and a scope.



**Fig 8. A male Many-colored Fruit-Dove.** An out-of-focus free-hand digiscope shot.

**Blue-crowned Lorikeets** were uncommon but regularly seen flying by, or resting in the trees. **Red-headed Parrot-finches** were relatively difficult to observe at Cloud 9, only three being recorded flying over. The more unexpected birds included a late afternoon **Australian Barn Owl** (+ another calling), a single **Wandering Tattler** (!) and a juvenile **Red-footed Booby**, all close to the lodge. The only **Island Thrush**, Samoan subspecies and therefore a theoretical future split, was seen by the Cloud 9 access road, hopping across it in the afternoon. **Black Noddies** were regular over the forested valley, far inland, with a couple of dozen **White Terns** visible most of the time, together with several **White-tailed Tropicbirds**. All in all, the Cloud 9 had almost all the target species and would be a great spot to observe the **Tooth-billed Pigeon**, if they still existed so close to Apia.

## VAISIGANO VALLEY

This key site was visited three times. Follow the main road past Apia Primary School, turn right to the cross-island road, take the first left (Vaitele Street), turn right at the three-way-crossing and follow the road up to a water reservoir. Vaisigano Valley has apparently deteriorated a bit since the earlier reports, with increasingly intensive human activities, plantations creeping higher up into the forest. I parked my car by the reservoir and stayed on the main track, after realizing that the right-hand trail mentioned in earlier reports had become completely overgrown. There was really no reason to wander around, as each of the target species could be seen within 100 meters of the concrete structure. Couple of times I walked or drove a few hundred meters ahead, but birding was slower there.

**Samoan Fantail** or two were present on each visit to the reservoir. **Samoan Flycatchers** (a lovely pair) were seen only once, the species being (for me) the most difficult one of the endemics. A flowering tree 30 meters beyond the reservoir kept on attracting dozens (once, over one hundred) **Samoan Wattled Honeyeaters** and a single **Mao** for the week, with close views of the latter species in one occasion. The omnipresent (forests) **Samoan Starlings** were around as well, with dozens of individuals. **Samoan Trillers** were recorded on the first and third visits, in the more open secondary forest and large trees on the left of the reservoir. Well, it is all secondary forest and banana trees, but primary forest is not far away.

The curious **Samoan Whistlers** normally approached me by the shadowy spot on the left of the reservoir, 1-2 individuals being seen on each visit. **Flat-billed Kingfishers** preferred the more open space in front of the concrete reservoir. **Red-headed Parrot-finches** were only seen on the second and third visit, with mostly flight records over the opening. Also the **Blue-crowned Lorikeets** (single birds) tended to be seen on flight. Other birds included several **Polynesian Starlings** and **Trillers** by the reservoir, and dozens of **Cardinal Myzomelas**, especially by flowering trees. **Pacific Pigeons**, and **Purple-capped** and **Many-colored Fruit-Doves**, were recorded on each visit, with low numbers. **Black Noddies**, **White-tailed Tropicbirds** and **White Terns** were frequently recorded flying low over the site, with nice photography opportunities for those who have proper equipment, and not a mere pocket camera like I myself.



**Fig 9.** Vaisigano Valley track, beyond the water reservoir, pipeline on the left.



**Fig 10.** A Purple-capped Fruit-Dove, by the water reservoir.



**Fig 11.** A **Samoan Starling**, the most common of the endemic species.



**Fig 12.** A **Samoan Fantail**. *Nebulosa* is a rather accurate name for this perky species.



**Fig 13.** One of the many '**Forest Black Noddies**' over the Vaisigano Valley.

### **CROSS-ISLAND ROADS**

Driving on the cross-island roads, one is not likely to see much from the car, except the common introduced 'trash birds' (**Red-vented Bulbul**, **Jungle** and **Common Myna**). **Banded Rails** are, however, abundantly everywhere, with small parties and cute black chicks enlightening the roadside stops. On top of the highway from Apia to the south coast, a wet meadow on the left had at least one **Pacific Black Duck**. The Papapapaitai Falls were worth a stop. Earlier, the tarmac beginning of the Lake Lanotoo Road had **Samoan Fantails** and **Trillers**. In the southwestern corner of the island, the small forest south of the road between the villages of Faleaseela and Faleatai was clearly more birdy than average, with several endemic species and fruit-doves. Mulifanua Golf Course, close to Savaii ferry landing, was an easy place to add **Purple Swamp-hen** on one's Samoa list. An **Australian Barn Owl** was seen by road along the inland Aleisa route from Cloud 9 to the Faleloa Airport at night. The species apparently is common on Upolu and driving around the rural roads at night is one way to locate it.



**Fig 14. A Samoan Flycatcher.**

### **NU'UTELE CORNER**

Off the southeastern corner of Samoa, a group of islands including Nu'utele and Nu'ulua, provide breeding grounds for a large number of seabirds. Consequently, this is one of the more obvious places on Upolu to do some seabird-watching. The driving time from Cloud 9 is about 1.45 to 2 hours, if one does not stop on the way. As I approached the village of Lalomanu, a small parking area with good visibility was located soon after Liti Sini's Beach Resort. In there, I parked the car, rear end towards the shore, and sat in the spacious trunk while scanning the ocean with a telescope – a total of six hours on two occasions. There is a small man-made stone 'pool' down by the shore, and the landowners collect money for the use of the beach. Eventually, a young man from the close-by village approached me, but agreed to not to require the payment (T15) because I was alone and stayed on the road.

Later on, another site was discovered in the village itself. As you enter the Lalomanu proper, mostly located on a small peninsula (Cape Tapaga) on the right, go up the hill and down on the main road, and turn right as soon as you reach the sea again. The road follows the eastern shore of the peninsula into the village, and up to some telecom masts. Do not stop in the depression before the masts, as there are some vicious dogs by the houses and one is likely to get bitten.

Ask permission from the house next to the masts, up on a top of a small hill (no charge in January 2009). It is possible to walk to a high, open ridge towards Nu'utele, from where the best views can be had, especially to the east side of the island. It is a peaceful location, from where the land-bird traffic to and from Nu'utele can also be controlled. With a telescope, it is possible to identify pigeons on the island. My only **White-throated (Metallic Green) Pigeon** in Samoa was seen from there.

During the visits, a steady traffic of boobies, terns, noddies, frigatebirds and tropicbirds was always present. Somewhat surprisingly, a **Blue-grey Noddy** was seen only once. They are, however, resident, and this is a stake-out for the species. A tight fishing party of over 1200 **Red-footed Boobies** was quite a sight, with equal number of 'red-foots' simultaneously present in the general area, plus hundreds of **Brown Boobies**. There were hundreds of **Common** and **Black Noddies**, **White-tailed Tropicbirds**, and several dozens of **Great Frigatebirds**. Only few **Bridled**, **Black-naped** and **Swift Terns** were seen, **Grey-backed (Spectacled)** being somewhat more common (max 10). The best bird record was a lone **Collared Petrel**, seen once for a short period close to Nu'utele. As usual, the early and late hours of the day were the best for seabird-watching, partly due to better visibility. Some of these species need to be seen quite well before a positive identification.



**Fig 15.** There are many beach fale in the southeastern corner of Upolu.



**Fig 16.** The island of Nu'utele. A narrow channel separates the island from mainland.



**Fig 17.** The Lalomanu village observation point. Beware the steep, deadly slopes!



**Fig 18.** A **Greater Frigatebird**, a common sight at Nu'utele.

## **MULINUU POINT**

The narrow peninsula points northwest on the west side of the Apia harbor, and holds many of the important functions of the state of Samoa, including the Parliament House and some German and British colonial relics. A new administrative building is currently being constructed by the Chinese, 'conveniently' on a ground likely to be submerged (or hit by a tsunami) as the sea levels rise with the accelerating climate change. Access is straightforward, along the Main Beach Road and Mulinuu Road from the town center (roundabout in the center of the Apia CBD), and there are several free parking spaces and picnic spots, from where the sea and coastal sand bars can be observed with a telescope.

**Bristle-thighed Curlew** is the star species there, a single individual being observed on one occasion, out of six brief visits. **Pacific Golden Plovers** are common and tame on lawns, **Turnstones**, **Wandering Tattlers** and **Eastern Reef-Egrets** being less numerous by the sea. There were hundreds of **Black** and **Common Noddies**, and **Black-naped**, **Bridled** (once) and **Grey-backed (Spectacled) Terns** among them. Small numbers of **Red-footed Boobies** and **Greater** and **Lesser Frigate-Birds** were present, as well. It is a nice place for a picnic lunch with some birdwatching as a side dish.



**Fig 19.** Mulinu Point, Apia CBD in the background.



**Fig 20.** A Pacific Golden Plover, a common lawn bird at Mulinu Point.



## **AT THE END OF THE DAY**

All in all, Samoa was a pleasant place to visit. The island of Upolu may have its problems with overpopulation, outdated Catholic norms and the erosion of natural resources, but it nevertheless remains one of the most laid back and hospitable tourism destinations in the Pacific. Importantly, the majority of Samoan endemic birds are still easy to find also in the most populated part of the island, next to Apia.

