



TAVEUNI, FIJI 2011 –

UPDATE INFORMATION FOR VISITING BIRDERS

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In July 2011, between 2nd and 7th, I visited Fiji for the second time. On the first visit in 2009, it had not been possible to go to the island of Taveuni, due to logistical limitations. It was a high time to correct this and travel to the island.

The main reasons for the journey were the following target species: **Black-winged Petrel**, **Red-throated Lorikeet**, **Red Shining-Parrot**, **Orange Dove**, **Shy Ground-Dove** and **Silktaail**. The **Orange Dove** and **Silktaail** in particular are among the most charismatic bird species in the world, with their unique colors and other features. In the three days I spent on Taveuni, all except the first two were located. The calm sea was practically empty of seabirds in early July and the possibly extinct lorikeet a rather tall order on such a brief visit.



Fig. 1. Nadi Airport, domestic departures.

ACCOMMODATION, FLIGHTS AND LUGGAGE

I flew in from Port Vila, Vanuatu, and continued to Tahiti via Auckland, both flights on Air Pacific. The climate in Fiji was stunningly humid after the fresh winds of Vanuatu, even though the temperatures did not differ that much. Two transit nights were spent in Nadi, at Raffles Gateway Hotel next to the airport. The Raffles Hotel remains a good deal even though I have never actually felt welcomed at the reception. Birders do apparently not fit into the local expectations of stereotypic tourist dudes. The standard room (European/U.S. style, with a narrow, relatively hard bed, nice bath, tv, tea/coffee) cost F\$110 per night, around €60. Breakfast is not included and may be had for lower price at the airport, at the café of domestic terminal (beware of high drink prices), while waiting for departure. Dinners cost F\$25 to F\$35, drinks included (**Fig.2**). The atmosphere at the restaurant, with its guitar band and Fijian songs, is very touristic.



Fig. 2. One of my Raffles Gateway dinners; fresh and healthy.

Extra luggage may be stored at the secure left luggage office of the domestic terminal to meet the De Havilland Island Hopper luggage 15 kg limit of. I had a suitcase, a pilot case, light canvas bag and a 280 g Fjällräven Kånken daypack to negotiate between the various luggage limits of my round-the-world trip. The suitcase, with the pilot case within, was left in Nadi for F\$10 per day and around 12 kg of things were carried to Taveuni. My tripod fit well in the canvas bag (closed with small padlocks) and the telescope itself was carried in the daypack.



Fig. 3. There are some great views of the archipelago from the Island Hopper...



Fig 4. On board the Taveuni flight.

The Pacific Sun flight to Taveuni was on time. My Australian friend Tom Tarrant had recommended Sukh Lal as a reliable driver with reasonable rates. Unfortunately, he had incidentally left for New Zealand the same morning I arrived. Moreover, his car is a 2x2 and is therefore not able to go up to the mountains. One has to walk several kilometers up and down, thereby seeing less birds. I took a random taxi to close-by Bibi's Hideaway in Matei (reservation at Taveuni Adventures/tobi@taveuni.com.au), my accommodation in Taveuni, and arranged the local transportation with them. The stay started with a nice talk and Sunday afternoon *kava* drinking session with Mr. James Bibi and a visiting pastor. I got a two room bungalow with kitchen and shower for myself, with plenty of space (**Fig. 5**).

For F\$120 per night, Bibi's is not a cheap place to stay for one person if compared with Raffles, for example, as there is no electricity after generator hours and no hot water. All in all, Taveuni is an expensive place if compared with Viti Levu, the main island. On the other hand, the place is peaceful and well run by Pauline and Patrick, the family very nice and hospitable, and the large garden provides an endless supply of fresh tropical fruits (e.g. passion fruit), which one is free to harvest as a guest. Check out is at 10 AM if the bungalow is reserved for new guests. Cooking is by gas and easy. On departure, I accidentally left my trekking stick in the bungalow. One of the sons of the family run to the airport with it and saved my day!



Fig. 5. My self-contained bungalow at Bibi's Hideaway.

About 15 minutes steep downhill (and up on return!) there is the Tramanto Open Air Restaurant for dinners and great views over the channel between Taveuni and Vanua Levu. As Tom Tarrant wrote in his Taveuni report, this is a good spot for seabird observations. The staff tolerated my telescope indoors and I scanned the sea from my table, but only few boobies, **Lesser Frigatebirds**, terns and noddies were seen. No petrels or shearwaters. The highlights of three two hour late afternoon sessions were the **Swordfish**, which were repeatedly seen leaping high off water on two occasions.

Expect to meet American tourists and second home developers at the restaurant, with a lot of 'awesome!' and 'wonderful!' and no understanding of the political tensions in the local society with a military government, supposedly a relaxed tropical paradise. Hawaii has become congested and the U.S. citizens are moving south to Fiji, with its direct flight connections to Los Angeles.

The garden had a good selection of Fiji endemics and other nice species, including **Fiji Goshawk**, **Australian Barn Owl**, **Collared Lory**, **Vanikoro Flycatcher**, **Polynesian Starling** and **Orange-breasted Myzomela**. **Fiji Wood-Swallows** and **Java Sparrows** (introduction) were seen close by. Unfortunately, the breeding **Jungle Mynas** also witnessed the continuous expansion of this invasive species in Fiji. I had some fun trying to digiscope a few of them in rain with my 'down the hill' Lumix pocket camera. With the **Vanikoro Flycatcher**, I managed to get two good shots.



Fig. 6. A female **Vanikoro Flycatcher** in light rain, at Bibi's Hideaway.



Fig. 7. A **Collared Lory**, one of the unique parrots of the Pacific Island.



Fig. 8. "I'm singing in the rain, singing in the rain..." – **Orange-breasted Myzomela** at Bibi's.

DES VOEUX PEAK

My driver was Menji, a relative of the Bibi family with a 4x4 pick up. He was a good driver but had a tendency of being late by 15 minutes or more. He asked F\$160 (quite a lot!) for the drive but agreed to do it for F\$150. One needs to start around 4.30 to 4.45 AM to get to the Des Voeux Peak (1.195 m) track, the key birdwatching site, on time just before sunrise. The track is rough in places and goes steep up to telecommunications towers which are serviced on daily basis. Down in a village there is an entrance gate which is closed at night, but a key may be borrowed at a house on the left before the gate. We woke the family up twice around 5 AM and got the key against an entrance fee (F\$10) which I had to pay, thereby paying the F\$160, after all. We then drove slowly up to the second gate (open), a prime spot for birding. Menji returned down or went further up to sleep, and picked me up six hours later. We went to Des Vouex Peak twice, on the 4th and 5th July.



Fig 9. The Spot at Des Voeux Peak track.

The weather was mostly overcast and misty at the upper parts of the mountain, with a few short rain showers and a clear second morning (very productive!). On the first visit I made the mistake of leaving the site 50 to 70 m up from the second gate too early, walking downhill for two kilometers with limited success with birds. On the other hand, doing this, I spotted the only **Shy Ground-Dove** of the trip! The dove is a widespread but rather difficult to locate species. On the second visit, I stayed on The Spot (**Fig. 9**) for the whole time, sitting down on roadside mounds or the road itself, silently stalking for the birds. As long as I sat down, the curious birds came to see me. Standing up, they tended to hide and avoid me. There is some unlicensed hunting on the

track, I was told by the locals, and the birds do not completely trust the humans they see in the forest. I also saw two 'forest dogs' there, and two **Tongan Fruit Bats**.

The highlight of the visits was the 'dance of the **Silktaails**' in the second morning. At dawn, an adult male **Silktail** appeared on a vertical branch just in front of me, at the curve spot portrayed in **Fig. 9** (the branch up right). It flicked its tail and made a peculiar dance on the branch, inspecting me for ages. The blue decorative feathers were shining and the white rump was very obvious, but there was not enough light for photographs. The bird is quite unique and reminded me of some smaller species of birds-of-paradise. It was soon joined by four other **Silktaails**. They were seen between 6.15 and 7.30, but not later. On the first visit, I had only seen very brief flight views of two individuals. During the day, they hide in the depths of the thick, inaccessible forest.

The other main target species, the **Orange Dove**, was common at the second gate, with up to 30 birds present, including at least three stunning males. The doves were present till 10 AM, after which they disappeared to roost somewhere else. No other dove in the world is able to compete with the neon colors of a male **Orange Dove**, the main challenger being also from Fiji, the unique **Golden Dove**. The doves were wary but also inquisitive, as long as I did not move on the road. The **Red Shining-Parrots** were always present, suspiciously observing the intruder from the canopy of trees, apparently insulting me with rude words and being exceedingly difficult to photograph.



Fig. 10. A male **Orange Dove** stands out in the forest, even in dark, overcast conditions.

Other interesting birds at the Des Voeux track included the territorial **Peregrines**, one chasing (playing rather than hunting) a **Red Shining-Parrot** in the mist, many **Barking Pigeons**, a resident party of **Collared Lorries**, a number of (15+) *hades* **Island Thrushes**, a potential future split, several

Polynesian Trillers, Fiji Wattled Honeyeaters, a few yellow-billed Giant Forest Honeyeaters, another potential split, a single Black-faced Shrikebill, a pair of Pacific Robins and several Blue-crested Flycatchers, Fiji Golden Whistlers, Fiji Bush Warblers, Streaked Fantails, Orange-breasted Myzomelas, hundreds of Layard's White-eyes and a few Peale's Parrotfinches.

AT THE END OF THE DAY

Fiji remains one of key birdwatching destinations in the South Pacific. The domestic flight services are aplenty and reliable, but accommodation is a problem on most islands. The fact that the government has failed to organize electricity even to large islands such as Taveuni and Kadavu is a definite handicap if compared with other destinations in the region. The birdlife, however, is unique and reasonably accessible. When visiting Fiji, plan to visit at least Viti Levu (Suva side), Kadavu and Taveuni, for which a minimum of one week is required, preferably 8 to 9 days.



Fig 11. The feminine bounty of tropical fruits...