

POHNPEI, MICRONESIA JUNE 2010 —



UPDATE INFORMATION FOR GLOBETROTTING BIRDERS

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Fig. 1. Micronesia – an archipelago of island and atolls.

The Island of Pohnpei is the center of the State of Pohnpei in Micronesia and also the location of government buildings of the Federation of Micronesia. Conveniently on the Continental Micronesia island hopper route from Guam to Chuuk, Pohnpei, Kosrae, Kwajalein (Marshall Island) and Majuro to Oahu, Hawaii, and also connected by other airlines, Pohnpei offers a nice stop over on one's way across the Central Pacific. More importantly, it is the home of several Micronesian bird endemics, notably **Pohnpei Lorikeet, Pohnpei Kingfisher, Pohnpei Cicadabird, Pohnpei Fantail, Pohnpei Flycatcher, Grey White-eye** and **Long-billed White-eye**, and one restricted range introduction, **Hunstein's Mannikin** from New Ireland (Papua-New Guinea). **Pohnpei Mountain Starling**

probably still occurs somewhere on the misty highlands, but there are no recent confirmed records and the access to potential areas is rather difficult, to say the least.

Two full days should be enough to see all the target species. Among the birds of interest, only **Long-billed White-eye** can be categorized to be difficult, as it is necessary to ascend to middle level forests to see it. This is easier said than done on the steep slopes and the locals have developed a lucrative business of guiding the foreign visitors to the white-eyes. When I made a request to Patterson Shed, he replied with a list of a 4x4 hire USD 55, fuel USD 50, guide USD 50, and organization USD 30, the total price being USD 185.00 per day, plus tips and a request to support Conservation Society of Pohnpei by a donation. It sounds almost like organizing a colonial safari to Africa in the days of colonial exploration. Being a keen member of Anonymous Stingy Birders (ASB) and not 100% sure if I was able to do the climb, I looked for other solutions. The species is, after all, relatively common in its habitat, which covers much of the tropical island.

Don Buden, a pioneer in Pohnpei bird surveys and a person who has actually seen the **Mountain Starling**, came to my rescue. He remembered to have repeatedly seen the **Long-billed White-eyes** in an overgrown pepper plantation relatively close to Kolonia, the capital of Pohnpei (another Micronesia settlement established by Spanish colonialist centuries ago). The site is 100 m above sea level, i.e. significantly lower than is generally thought to be the preference of the species. It apparently is the geography of the site and/or food availability which attracts the birds to the plantation from the close by ridges.

The site was at Dolen Kahmar, close to the Liduduniap Falls. In the Internet (e.g. Wikipedia) one may find the United States Department of the Interior Geological Survey Map (1:25000). Driving east from Kolonia, towards Pohnpei State Hospital, one finds a road to the right, to the interior, just before the hospital. By continuing straight for some distance, passing a local police station (R), one arrives at a small hydroelectric plant at the Pilen River. The road becomes gravel there, turning right uphill (narrow spot) at the southern tip of the Dohlen Kahmar ridge.

After few hundred meters, there is a three way junction (gauging station and farms to the left). This is the pepper plantation. The good birding is before the junction and about half a kilometer forward (marked 4WD, but ok for 2WD). Beyond a stream crossing, there is space to turn around. One may either walk (hot&humid) or drive slowly (mind the traffic on the narrow road). Surprisingly many people travel on the road but the birds do not really mind. The main road is rough in places towards the junction, but passable with a 2WD. I had a Hyundai Tucson which was perfect for the task.



Fig. 2. Dohlen Kahmar overgrown pepper plantation, a relatively open section. See the so called '4WD' track, quite suitable for 2WD, too.



Fig. 3. Pohnpei airport, surrounded by mangroves.

Day 1 (25th June 2010)

I arrived in Pohnpei at noon and immediately noticed the good infrastructure and high mountains, a relief after the derelict Chuuk. Cliff Rainbow Hotel shuttle waited at the departures and carried me and other customers to the hotel in 15 minutes. I checked in a single room in the old wing, where the best deals can be had. The room with air conditioning, fridge and television cost USD 42 per night (cliffrainbow@mail.fm, tel. 691-2415/5939), a fair rate for the small but practical unit.



Fig. 4. My USD 42 single room. Yes, we Finns do always carry a big knife with us...

The old Across the Road restaurant was damaged years ago in a major typhoon and does not exist anymore. There is an empty lot across the street instead, with views over coastal mangroves and Sokeh Island. The Cliff Rainbow restaurant in the new wing has good food, fast service and air conditioning. For example, a dinner with soup, garlic chicken and mashed potatoes and vegetables, and vanilla ice cream as a dessert was USD 12.00 + tip, bottled water included. Alternatively, go to the smaller South Park Hotel restaurant across the street with equal food and prices (views to the mangroves are not that good from there). No sign of Eric Cartman and friends there, by the way, despite high expectations, not even Kenny...

It was difficult to find sugar-free drinks in the restaurants, including water in the case of South Park Hotel. On arrival, I eventually gave up and had tap water with ice cubes, with very predictable consequences. The same problem existed with Kolonia supermarkets, heavy syrups being the preferred thing. The Wall Mart (!) at the ocean-side end of the main street proved to be the best choice, also for take away food, despite its awful name. I would most definitely not support the real thing in the United States!

Observing the mangroves with a scope at the above-mentioned viewpoint was not very productive, even though I did it for more than two hours before sunset (6.45 PM). Eight **Pohnpei Fruit Bats** was a nice find, the plump bats looking rather pretty. A few dozen more were seen in other places during the following days. The first endemic was the smart **Pohnpei Lorikeet**, with about 20 noisy birds. They were soon followed by three tiny **Grey White-eyes**, another Pohnpei endemic since the Kosrae form was split to full species. Otherwise, only the common, widespread birds showed up. No sign of **Pohnpei Cicadabird**, the main target of the evening.

Day 2 (26th June 2010)

Slept late, because my Budget car was not going to arrive before 10.00 PM. I had a confirmed reservation for Toyota Yaris (or similar) from Budget International, but the reservation had never arrived in their Pohnpei branch. Fortunately, I had contacted the Budget representative I saw in the airport arrivals hall the day before and he had promised to deliver anyway. It was a pleasant surprise to get a Hyundai Tucson (high clearance) instead of Yaris, for the same price, with conditions as in the reservation.

After a long period of shopping for drinks and food, I resisted going for the **Long-billed White-eye**. Instead, I drove to the government buildings and College of Micronesia campus at Palikir, some distance away from the capital, exploring the side roads in the general area. The campus grounds had an obliging party of 19 **Hunstein's Mannikins** in roadside grass, a **Pohnpei Kingfisher** on telephone wires and a **Pohnpei Fantail** and many **Grey White-eyes** at forest edge. **Caroline Islands Fruit Doves**, **Caroline Islands Swiftlets**, **Pohnpei Lorikeets** and **Caroline Islands Reed Warblers** were also seen close by.

At 1 PM it was time to go to the Dolen Kahmar pepper plantation. I arrived at 1.30 PM and stayed till 6 PM, going slowly back and forth on the 500 meter stretch and using my car as an air-conditioned hide. It was possible to pull out in a few places. Four and half hours was a long time in such a small area, trying to stay sharp all the time, but definitely worth it. The more common species included one **Pohnpei Kingfisher** (access road), **Caroline Islands Fruit Doves**, **Caroline Islands Swiftlets**, **Pohnpei Lorikeets**, **Caroline Islands Reed Warblers** (only few), **Pohnpei Fantails** (20; close views) and **Grey White-eyes** (30+).



Fig. 5. The main street of Kolonia, the capital of Pohnpei. Life is slow there, fortunately.



Fig. 6. Pohnpei Kingfisher, either full species or subspecies of Micronesian Kingfisher.

The best two species were eventually seen in a period of only five minutes. First, a single **Long-billed White-eye** going through the bush right by the track – a big relief! I could not help thinking about all those expeditions on slippery mountain trails... And five minutes later, a stunning party of one male and two female-plumaged **Pohnpei Cicadabirds!** The curious but shy birds investigated me two to five meters away, low down in the thicket. Unfortunately, a young lady with 8 daughters passed by, scaring the birds away before I could take a photo. Got one of the male, completely out of focus. The Lumix pocket camera is a nightmare in shady forest situations, focusing on branches instead of the bird.

Nevertheless, all the target species except **Pohnpei Flycatcher** seen on the first half day of birdwatching! Thank you Don for the excellent tip on Dohlen Kahmar!



Fig. 7. An example of plant life at the pepper plantation.

Day 3 (27th June 2010)

Wake up at 5.30 AM and straight to the Dolen Kahmar site. I stayed for three hours and saw significantly less birds than in the previous afternoon visit, in somewhat wetter (light showers) conditions. Perhaps the pepper farm is more productive in the afternoons? At 6 AM it definitely was too much in the shadow of the big ridge. Saw all the species of yesterday except the two best ones. Bored with the site, I decided to revisit the College of Micronesia for the **Pohnpei Flycatcher**. On the first visit, I had seen a promising habitat for

the species in forest about one and half kilometers past the campus, on the road which goes through the grounds, veers lefts and continues downhill towards the coast. At the edge of the forest, there is a house on the left and a road to another one forward on the right. The right hand access track had some easy to observe, semi-open edge forest.

It did not take long to see the dark **Pohnpei Flycatcher** there, with long and detailed views. The site also had a *takatsukasai* **Caroline Islands White-eye**, my only one and apparently a relatively difficult to see species in Pohnpei. There were only two **Hunstein's Mannikins** at the campus grounds, plus the reliable two **Pohnpei Kingfishers** and over ten **Caroline Islands Reed Warblers** in the general area. With the last missing species seen, I suddenly felt very tired and returned to Cliff Rainbow Hotel, for a lunch and rest till 4.30 PM. The hard work, hot and humid weather and diarrhea had taken their toll.



Fig. 8. Part of the College of Micronesia campus grounds (the main buildings do not show).

In the evening, short visits to the remains of Spanish fortification, Nett Point (not worth a visit), the airport/harbor causeway (many socializing locals) and to the airport building itself were made. The airport end of the causeway had two **Pohnpei Kingfishers**. Early to bed, because I was not going to sleep at the following night, on the flight to Hawaii and in transit at the Honolulu Airport.



Fig. 9. A seed-eating party of **Hunstein's Mannikins**. Look for uncut grass!



Fig. 10. A **Pohnpei Lory** at Dolen Kahmar. They can also be silent for long periods of time.

Day 4 (27th June 2010)

On the way to the airport, a small area of low tide mud on the left, at the beginning of the causeway, had a **Siberian Tattler** and a **Pacific Heron**, adding two species on my Pohnpei list. At the airport, I had some problems with Budget. We had agreed to meet at the airport at 10 AM, but the representative (different guy now) arrived at 11.45, forcing me to hang out in the hot and humid check in area instead of the air-conditioned boarding area, which also had the clean toilet (my diarrhea was not completely over). Moreover, I barely made it to the flight. Did he apologize? No! He tried to charge me for returning my car too late! It was another case of miscommunication, and a rather annoying one for me. The airport staff told me that Budget does this all the time.

We landed first on Kosrae, where I probably looked like an idiot, trying to see a **Kosrae Grey White-eye** in the few trees and bushes by the runway. No luck with this one. Then Kwajalein, Marshall Islands, where we were not allowed out during the security check, because there were so few of us on board. On each landing, Continental Micronesia checks one side of the plane, asking people seated on that side to leave with their hand luggage. Saw four **Turnstones** and no less than 26 **Pacific Golden Plovers** on the runway, looking through the seat window. In Majuro, the next stop, we went out to the airport building at sunset. One does not really understand the vulnerable flatness of these atolls in the middle of high seas before one sees them. Six **Black Noddies** and six **Pacific Golden Plovers**. Marshall Islands, even though beautiful, are not known for their bird diversity.

Honolulu Airport... Welcome to the cold, indifferent world! Had a chat with a Filipino security guard, found my way to Go! Mokulele terminal and waited in darkness for six long hours.





Fig. 11. High over the Pacific Ocean..



Fig. 12. Parked at the Majuro Atoll, Marshall Islands. Sea on the left, behind the men, and on the right, behind the palms.