



# YAP (WA'AB), MICRONESIA JUNE 2010 —

## UPDATE INFORMATION FOR GLOBETROTTING BIRDERS

Petri Hottola (University of Oulu & Finnish University Network for Tourism Studies)



**Fig. 1.** Colonia Harbor, Yap, in the evening.

On the 12<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> June 2010, I visited the island of Yap in Micronesia, as a part of a private round-the-world birdwatching tour. Star Alliance RTW tickets are the most convenient and economical way to visit Micronesia, the Northern Marianas and a few other places in the region. The islands can be approached from Japan, Singapore, South Korea or Hawaii, to name few alternatives. With the RTW ticket, one does not need to pay the high prices of Continental Micronesia, in many cases in a position of monopoly as the only airline connecting the islands, but a much lower rate. There are departure taxes, but they are relatively low.

When in this part of the Micronesia, the island of Yap is a must for a stop-over, with its six endemic species and other island specials: **Micronesian Pigeon, White-throated Ground-Dove, Yap Cicadabird, Yap Monarch, Plain White-eye** and **Olive White-eye**. At the moment, it is going to be a three day stop-over because of the flight timetables, with late night arrival and departure; plenty of time to explore the small island. Yap is the colonial name of the island and a state of Micronesia. The local name is Wa'ab. Wa'ab may well take over in the future (cf. Truk -> Chuuk, Ponape -> Pohnpei). Detailed maps are available in the Internet.

There are Yapese bird guides available, but a guide is not really necessary unless one looks for company or is not yet experienced in birding abroad. Some tour operators may claim that a guide is required to guarantee access to private land. Just about all land is private. It is widespread Pacific custom to request a permit to enter private forests and beaches, with oftentimes a fee to be paid. As the following short report will show, all the target species may, however, be observed on public land. Yap is small, remote and attractively traditional, but also well organized with all the necessary services and a variety of accommodation choices around its capital, Colonia, by the Chamorro Lagoon. **Manta Rays** and other oceanic wonders are available for divers. With its many positive attributes, which will be mentioned in the following text, Yap ranks high among the Pacific islands as a travel destination.

### **Day 1 (12<sup>th</sup> June 2010)**

My flight from Guam had been delayed by an hour due to a technical problem, which developed at the gate, just when we were ready to go. The jet had to be replaced. Continental Micronesia arranged this remarkably well.

At the TSA security check in Guam, the officer in charge had got rather excited when I told him that I was going to fly to Yap. 'Oh you lucky man! Did you know that Yapese women go bare-breasted? You are going to see a lot of naked breasts!', he went on and on... Somewhat annoyed by the lascivious outburst, I told him, in a similar style, that I was actually more into the feathered kind of birds. This worked as expected. He immediately went away to tell my words to his female colleague. They laughed together (without noticing that the joke was on them) on this reversal of a common line birdwatchers occasionally hear from cretins unable to grasp the

idea of an interest in birds, and nature in general. Security work must be really boring on these remote islands...



**Fig. 2.** Waiting for a plane, Guam International Airport.

On arrival at 11 PM, two bare-breasted Yapese 'maidens' waited for us, looking a bit nervous. One of them put a garland around my neck and welcomed me to the island. Later on, I discovered that even though the island is known for its 'maidens', the women of the main island tend to be dressed in a European style. The graceful traditional dress is the norm in the more remote corners and on the outer islands. The outer islanders visit Colonia on a daily basis for shopping and a number of bare bosoms and stunning beauties were indeed noted by the supermarket there. It was initially a bit awkward to walk between the shelves looking for groceries, with sometimes two or three rather voluptuous matrons sharing the same limited space. Polite greetings and excuses are the way to go, with respect and admiration to local climate-adjusted traditions. Many Yapese have resisted the forceful introduction of the Christian shame of the human body and need to be congratulated for that.

Well, enough of the bare breasts. Tired after the flight, I was expecting to be picked up by a car from Hilltop Motel. They were there. They did not, however, know about me. Another customer was supposed to arrive, but he was not on the flight, probably because his dates were equally incorrect. All the confusion had been created by Ms. Su M. Yasui (naturesway@mail.fm), a tour company operator who acts as an Internet interface for this and several other hotels in Colonia and tries to tell you to forget any solo activities on the island.

In the darkness of the night, the red-eyed guys on a betel-nut high appeared a bit suspect, but were polite and took me to the hotel, run by a young Filipino woman with a Yapese lady as the day-time manager. The evening was extremely humid and hot and it was a relief to get into the air-conditioned double (USD 50.00 per night without breakfast but with a fridge and basic cooking facilities). There was a nice television and a DVD set there, but they were only for dvds (rental close by, USD 2.25/day). There is no television channel on Yap. Quite an exquisite experience in today's media-centered world! I put the garland on a shelf and hit the bunk, 20 minutes past midnight.



**Fig. 3. Yap Fruit Bat**, flying over Colonia at dusk. The light brown collar shows well.

## Day 2 (13<sup>th</sup> June 2010)

Exhausted by the Sapporo-Tokyo-Guam-Yap flights and the sleepless nights in the previous week, I slept 'late', waking up at 7.20 AM. The sun had risen at 6 AM. After some rest and first garden bird records, I took a taxi to center (50 cents) and to the airport, to the town, and back to the motel (+USD 5.00). No Budget people at the airport car rental (the meeting place of my confirmed reservation), nor at their 'city office'. It was, after all, Sunday. Later on, I visited the office again and found out that Budget International had never informed the Colonia branch of my 'confirmed' Internet reservation. The same happened in Pohnpei, two weeks later.

Back at the hotel, I told the pretty and resourceful Filipino woman of my situation. She immediately called the last night's driver. John had a Toyota Mark II Grande for rent, for USD 38.95 per day. The car looked like a former high administrator's car, with its better than normal indoors and bonnet flagpoles in the front. No insurance, no written contract. I asked what would happen if I completely destroyed the car. After a moment of contemplating, he replied: 'I don't know!' Well, nothing happened. There is little traffic, the tarmac roads are fine and even though the cars are from Japan and both the steering wheel and driving are on the right, it is not stressful at all in these conditions. The main thing is to follow the few stop signs in the center of Colonia strictly, as they are right next to the police station.

I did a short afternoon visit to the WWI Japanese military airfield in the swampy bush beyond the current airport. The place is relatively peaceful and allows approaching the bush on a public land, with little need to mind passing traffic. Moreover, one may park in a good spot and observe the birds from the car, using it as a convenient hide. There are remains of Japanese warplanes and anti-aircraft guns around, but one needs a guide to spot them. The U.S. bombed the island to incapacitate it, but never invaded it, letting the remaining Japanese wait there for the end of the war. The location of the runway can be seen in Internet maps.

A dinner was had at the ESA hotel restaurant (Hilltop Motel does not have one) in Colonia. The delicious and filling meals are between USD 6.75 – 10.75 and drinks USD 1.50 – 2.50. The terrace is a good place to observe roost time bird traffic over the Chamorro Lagoon and the hills behind it.



**Fig. 4.** My privately rented car at the WWII Japanese airfield with access to forest.

The first **Yap Fruit Bats** ('Flying Foxes') were recorded in the evening. The airfield had a **White-throated Ground Dove** and more than 20 **Plain White-eyes**. At least 50 **Micronesian Myzomelas** and **Starlings** each were seen. The last three species had already been observed at the **Hilltop Motel** yard, too. These were my first records of the myzomela and starling, two common and widespread species in the region. Among the more widespread species, a roosting party of 12 white form **Pacific Reef Egrets** was an interesting sight at Chamorro Lagoon. Not a single mixed form egret, not to mention black, among them!

### **Day 3** (14<sup>th</sup> June 2010)

The rest was over and I had a car. At sunrise I went straight to the Fanif Road, where a decision to stay on the main tarmac road was made. The good area is after the gravel side track (houses) to the left, to Fanif, in a valley where the road goes down and up through a forest. The best spot for observation was on the uphill section, in a

place where the forest ends and meets a meadow on the left (a private quarry behind it). The edge of the forest had many birds and there were wide views around, with altogether 8 **Micronesian Pigeons** either calling from tree tops or making territorial flights above the trees. Other birds included 5 **White-throated Ground Doves**, about 10 **Yap Monarchs** (2 seen), over 150 **Plain White-eyes** and hundreds of the widespread species. The star birds were the **Olive White-eye**, with two single birds in roadside bush, and **Yap Cicadabird**, a single female fly-by. **Yap Fruit Bat** was relatively common over the forested ridge.



**Fig. 5.** A male **Yap Monarch**, typically inside a thicket.

Beyond the forested valley, on top of the uphill section, a gravel road goes right down into forest, passing a house on left. This probably is a private road and I proceeded only to a T-junction not far away, close to a homestead. Several nice birds were however seen, with excellent close views of a male **Yap Monarch** and a **White-headed Ground Pigeon**. Going further north along the main road, one soon arrives to mangroves, a Yapese stone money bank and extensive tidal flats. Two

**White-browed Crakes** and two **Pacific Golden Plovers** (on the tarmac) were seen, but no other shorebirds. The best site for them was in Colonia itself, on the way to a seaside wastewater facility (forward at the shopping center, to the end of the road), where a turn to the right revealed a nice spot for a few wintering waders: **Turnstones**, **Rufous-collared Stints** and a lone **Greater Sand Plover**.



**Fig. 6.** The good forested valley along Fanif Road.

After visiting the Fanif Road, I returned to Colonia and to the Japanese airfield. There are two access roads to the runways; one to the left and past a radar station about one kilometer after the current airport junction (the first road to the left), and another one beyond the first access, at a point where the road meets the tip of the airfield on the left (obscured by bush). Two **Intermediate Egrets** (vagrants?) were seen on the way there. Otherwise, 3 male **Yap Monarchs** plus over 50 **Plain White-eyes** and many of the common species, such as **Red Junglefowl**, **Yellow Bittern**, **Rufous Fantail**, **Micronesian Myzomela** and **Micronesian Starling**.



**Fig. 7. Greater Sand Plover, a Turnstone and a Red-necked Stint, well camouflaged in afternoon haze.**



**Fig. 8. Micronesian Pigeons love to call on dead tree trunks (Fanif Road).**

A mid-day break followed. Between 3 and 6.30 PM, another attempt at the above-mentioned Fanif Road sites was made: 3 **White-headed Ground Doves**, 11 **Micronesian Pigeons**, 3 **Yap Monarchs**, 1 singing **Yap Cicadabird**, over 100 **Plain White-eyes** and 1 **Olive White-eye**. Another dinner at the ESA restaurant and an evening spent with 'The Road' on dvd. Great movie, and a nice contrast with the 'tropical paradise' of Yap.

#### **Day 4** (15<sup>th</sup> June 2010)

Not so much birdwatching on the last day but futile attempts to locate the WWII relics mapped by the Moon Micronesia guidebook. The map proved to be too inaccurate. More birding at Fanif Road between 6.30 – 9.00 AM, then Colonia, shopping, and a rest between 10 – 11 AM. Left the room at noon, with confusion with payment as Su M. Yasui had instructed the motel people to tell me to pay it to her at Nature's Way (in town center). She was, however, not at her office. Her secretary could not accept my money, because she did not know how much to charge. It did not help that the motel manager knew the price. I was told to return three hours later.

Went to birdwatch at the Japanese Airfield and eventually returned the Nature's Way office. Su had been there and she had now said that I could pay the room at the Hilltop Motel. All this gives you an idea how things tend to go when dealing with this company. I went back to Hilltop Motel, paid the room and returned the Toyota Mark II. Filling the tank took USD 28.00 at the only gas pump of the island, next to the shopping center. John gave me and my luggage a lift to the ESA hotel for an early dinner. Just like the other hotels, the ESA Hotel had almost all of its rooms vacant. They charged USD 74.80 for single and 83.60 for double occupancy. Well after sunset, I took a taxi to the airport (USD 2.50) for a late night Continental Micronesia flight to Koror, Palau.

The best bird of the day was a roadside female **Yap Cicadabird** in Fanif – finally ideal views as long as I wished to observe. A **Greater Sand Plover** was a nice find in Koror, together with the **Red-necked Stints**. Eight **White-headed Ground Doves** and eight **Micronesian Pigeons** were seen, with one female of the former species. Three **Yap Monarchs**, over 100 **Plain White-eyes** (abundant), also in Colonia and no less than seven **Olive White-eyes** in Fanif, three and four together, were also recorded.



**Fig. 9.** Sunset at Chamorro Lagoon,; ESA Hotel terrace.



**Fig. 10.** A home in the outer islands...