



CHUUK IN JUNE 2010 –

UPDATE INFORMATION FOR GLOBETROTTING BIRDERS

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Fig. 1. This is what Chuuk is best known for; Weno streets/canals on a typical day.

Among the four states of Micronesia, Chuuk (formerly, Truk) is an anomaly. The other states are reasonably well run, with good infrastructure. The capital of Chuuk, Weno, on the other hand is the opposite. It is dirty and depressing, the main negative feature being its streets, which are one big pothole of mud and brown water, to put it nicely. You would not like to own a car there. They do not last long but soon end up on the backyard piles of wrecks, despite the very low kilometers on the meter. All this may, however, change.

On the arrival in Chuuk, I was the first passenger to go through the immigration. A cheerful pick up from the Truk Stop Hotel waited for me outside and a short (distance) but long (driving time) drive followed. As we swam through the waters, the driver made a few jokes on the situation and admitted Chuuk being famous for its derelict roads. The local administration simply was not as capable as on the other islands. Recently, something significant had however been noticed. The sewage pipeline under the water which was supposed to be road had broken at a number of places. As the wastewater pipes had wisely been placed next to equally fragile drinking water pipes under the streets, something simply had to be done. Finally, work had been started to correct the situation.

Observing the scale of the situation, I suggested easy to maintain on-ground pipelines and some digging of the roads (not much needed) in order to let the sea on the streets. A Venice of the Pacific and boats instead of cars, and channels with tropical fish would be a hit in tourism! It does not take long to become sarcastic on Chuuk. It not about the roads only, but accommodation, too. There apparently are no budget options in Weno, the dampness of premises and security being the problem at most places. All things considered, I opted to stay at Truk Stop Hotel (TrukStop@mail.fm), an overpriced (USD 109, prepaid) but otherwise practical place to stay, with air-conditioned rooms, restaurant and access to seashore. Trips had to be made by a taxi, roadworks having made walking an even less attractive option than before.



Fig. 2. The Truk Stop Hotel, seen from its boat jetty.

Chuuk has, however, other attributes which attract birdwatchers to stop there, despite the unavoidable draw-backs. The main island has **Caroline Islands Ground Doves**, **Caroline Islands Fruit Doves**, **Caroline Islands Swiftlets**, **Oceanic Flycatchers**, **Caroline Islands Reed Warblers** and **Caroline Islands White-eyes**. Only **Oceanic Flycatcher** is, strictly speaking, an endemic, but the other species are also easier to see here than in the other options. In fact, 50 meters of trail at the Japanese Gun site (naval gun bunker), right next to Weno, will have all these species. Additionally, two much sought after Chuuk endemics, **Truk Monarch** and **Great Truk White-eye** can be observed at Tol South and some other islands of the Chuuk archipelago.

Much against my character and previous record of risk-taking, I decided to not to try the last two species. There were three reasons for the decision: 1) It is a rather rough ride to Tol South in an open boat, definitely not good for my back, 2) the visits have become a rip off, and 3), most importantly, I was not likely to survive the climb. One needs to climb 300 meters up on steep, slippery slopes with no trail, through bush with the help of machete hacking locals, in high humidity and possibly rain. The Internet reports have mentioned hurt legs and broken optics as a result, with 90% success with both birds, albeit oftentimes not so good views. Go for it if you are up to it. I was not and will envy you.



Fig. 3. One of the few thousand of bumps a boat will make on its way to Tol South, in calm weather...

Instead, I made two short afternoon trips to the Japanese Gun, more or less between spells of rain (the bunker offers shelter for short shower) in mostly dark, cloudy weather. The car was arranged by the hotel (USD 10 return). The directions are easy. One drives first to the southwestern part of the town and turns then right uphill towards the Chuuk hospital (see Internet maps). Instead of visiting the hospital, continue up to the end of the road. There are some derelict buildings there. Ask for permission to visit if approached by the watchman at the last house. I had no problems and was not asked to give money. The main problem was to convince the driver and a volunteer bird guide (first visit) that I did not need any help in spotting the birds. It is nuisance to be pointed birds which you have already seen a while ago. Occasionally, men 'under the influence' may occupy the bunker and it may be best to return later.

The birds are all around the parking area and the entrance to the gun cave. The bunker can be approached by taking a narrow trail up through grass from the end of the road. The entrance is visible from there. Going through the bunker (25 meters), one arrives on the other side, on a cliff overhanging Weno. There is a swamp down below, with occasional ducks.

The existence of **Caroline Islands Ground Doves** at this site has created some debate in the Internet. It has been thought to be too open and close to habitation for the shy species, which may look a bit similar to **Caroline Islands Fruit Dove** in flight. Several visitors have, however, reported the ground doves there. I hope the inclusion of Fig. 4 puts an end to the debate, despite the bad quality of the shot (dark conditions, poor pocket camera). The **Caroline Islands Ground Doves** (2 to 3 individuals) were there on each visit, and looked absolutely stunning through binoculars, doing whatever they did at a short distance!

Caroline Island Fruit Doves were common, with 30 birds present, but not quite as numerous as the noisy **Swiftlets** (30-40), hunting insects together with **Pacific Sheat-tailed Bats** at dusk. The **Caroline Islands Swiftlets** could also be observed at the Truk Stop Hotel mangroves, early in the morning and late in the evening. Two pairs of **Oceanic Flycatchers** occupied the gun site, together with at least 8 pairs of **Caroline Islands Reed Warblers** and around 20 **Caroline Islands White-eyes**.

All the species were readily seen on both visits, without much effort. Other species recorded at the Japanese Gun site included **Rufous Night-Herons**, **Micronesian Starlings**, **Micronesian Myzomelas** and four **Blue-faced Parrot-Finches**. It is a really good spot to observe birds and to see them well, too.



Fig. 4. Adult **Caroline Islands Ground Dove** at the Japanese Gun site, out of focus.



Fig. 5. The gun itself, with the Weno swamp down in the background.

The private boat landing site and the mangroves at the Truk Stop Hotel would have been a good place to photograph fly-by **Brown** and **Black Noddies**, **Black-naped Terns**, **White Terns** and **White-tailed Tropicbirds**. It was also favored by **Rufous Night-Herons**, **Pacific Reef Egrets**, **Yellow Bitterns**, a pair of **Caroline Islands Reed Warbler**, **Micronesian Myzomelas**, **Micronesian Starlings** and an odd shorebird. Two **Pacific Golden Plovers** passed by (6 at the airport) and a single **Little Curlew** was a pleasant surprise, when it landed on a grassy area close by. The species may be a regular vagrant at Chuuk, a bit away from its main migration routes. Beware of slippery walkways!



Fig. 6. Pacific sunset at the Truk Stop Hotel, at its lively restaurant.

It was a relief to get away from Chuuk to Pohnpei. I really enjoyed the dry air on board, falling asleep after a short while. The island would nevertheless have great potential as a tourism destination, if the roads and other basic infrastructure would be repaired. The whole perception of the island could change at once. As I left the island, sun started to shine. The view from the plane revealed magnificent reefs and atolls. There is the WWII history, too, with 100 bombed Japanese ships, over 250 warplanes and many cannons and bunkers on all the main islands.



Fig. 7. A Rufous Night-Heron, at the Truk Stop Hotel.



Fig. 8. Caroline Islands Swiftlets, late in the evening.



Fig. 9. Sun is shining at the Chuuk airport, Continental Micronesia Boeing has just landed.



Fig. 10. The Guam, Chuuk, Pohnpei, Kosrae, Kwajalein, Majuro and Oahu island hopper.



Fig. 11. Shoreline view of the Chuuk Island; a neglected paradise.