



# ESPIRITU SANTO, VANUATU 2011 – UPDATE INFORMATION FOR VISITING BIRDERS

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A destination rarely visited, Vanuatu remains a challenge in regard to birding information. Even though well and conveniently connected by air with Australia (Brisbane, Sydney), the island nation is apparently disregarded also by Ozzie birders. The few Internet trip reports tend to start with 'this was not a birdwatching vacation' or to underline the need for a high mountain expedition to see the birds. Vanuatu in general has a reputation of being wild and undeveloped.

The image of Vanuatu as a bird tourism destination needs to be updated. It is today an easygoing destination, a gem so far discovered by a limited number of tourists. The services and infrastructure are there and have recently been improved in the case of Espiritu Santo, the main bird island. The locals are in polite and welcoming, albeit a bit shy. In the local restaurants, one may indulge into some of the best food in the region. Moreover, the main target bird species (endemics) are accessible, with few exceptions. The majority of them may be observed with relative ease, without a guide, by renting a car and doing it by oneself.

The following notes on a short visit to the island of Espiritu Santo, on the last week of June in 2011, have been made to help others with an interest in Vanuatu's birdlife. They are based on my personal impressions, more or less accurate, in rather pleasant seasonal weather conditions (cool and sunny). Other visits may well have different results. I did not have recordings of the songs of all the local species and may have therefore missed species such as **Melanesian Thicketbird**, difficult to locate unless heard.

VT indicates Vanuatu vatu, the local currency. In June 2011, 100 vatu equaled 0.74 euro. Vanuatu is an affordable place to visit, especially if one happens to travel from Australia, New Zealand or East Asia. For the Americans, there are the flights from Los Angeles to Fiji, and a short transit to Port Vila. Food and accommodation is available at very reasonable rates.

## **Flights, accommodation and car rental**

My arrival was in Port Vila, the international gateway of Vanuatu. Depending on flight schedules, it may be a good idea to stop there before flying further on, to the more birdy islands of the archipelago, such as Espiritu Santo ('Santo' in everyday language). Air Vanuatu may be generally reliable but it is also frequently delayed and it is therefore not necessarily wise to have a tight transit in Port Vila. There are, however, several daily flights to Santo and other domestic destinations (**Fig. 1**), which may be reserved in the Internet. Contrary to Internet and other

information, a tourist with an international connection may check over 20 kg of luggage in a domestic flight, instead of the regular 10 kg. For each domestic flight, a small tax fee is collected prior to boarding.



**Fig. 1.** Air Vanuatu domestic flight to Espiritu Santo is ready for boarding.

I myself needed a rest after busy birding in Bali and Northern Territory (lost 10 kg!) and opted for staying one night at the pleasant and convenient Coral Motel ([www.coralmotel.com](http://www.coralmotel.com); [coralmotel@vanuatu.com.vu](mailto:coralmotel@vanuatu.com.vu)) in Port Vila, close to the Bauerfield Airport. On return, I rested two nights there before another flight to Nadi, Fiji. The Coral Motel is run by an Australian couple, cost vatu 7.000 (€52) per night and was very well organized indeed, including airport transfers (by taxi VT 1.000, €7.40). The motel had spacious rooms with kitchenettes and I could leave my extra luggage there, to be picked up before the next international connection. Laundry was included in the room rate.

Port Vila has great meals available for very competitive prices. For example, the Baywatch (one km from Coral Motel) had French cuisine lunch with fresh lime juice for VT 1.000, €7.40 (**Fig. 2**), with large servings and a view to the bay and its assortment of luxury yachts. Alternatively, one may cook by oneself. There is some very high quality beef in local supermarkets for a pittance (20% of Australian prices!), not to mention other food items, beer and wine.



**Fig. 2.** A delicious budget lunch at Baywatch Restaurant, with a view to Port Vila Bay.

In Luganville, Santo, I stayed at the Apex Garden Hotel ([www.apex-garden.com](http://www.apex-garden.com); [stay@apex-garden.com](mailto:stay@apex-garden.com)), the number one option in town. The place has modern, new and tidy rooms for vatu 8.500, a restaurant with an extensive but not expensive menu (expect too large servings) and car rental with guarded parking space (opens at 7 AM, need to inform the guard if leaving earlier) – everything a visiting birder needs in a base for explorations. Simon the manager will organize things for you and reply your emails and/or faxes. There are other restaurants, a bakery and supermarkets close by. The shops open and close early (sunrise and sunset); try to buy bottled water and snacks for trips on arrival or return early enough for shopping. The village shops e.g. around Butmas do have very limited stocks.

The 4x4 I rented was an impressive ZX GrandTiger Turbo, made in China, with four searchlights on its roof, for around vatu 11.000 (€80) per day (**Fig. 3**). Being a new car with only 9.000 km under its belt, the vehicle delivered well, even though some of its less vital parts were already becoming loose. That is the difference between Chinese and Japanese 4x4s; the first ones have cheap spare parts but they also tend to need a lot of them. A 4x4 is a necessity in Santo, as soon as one leaves the one and only paved road, the new East Coast Highway from Luganville to Port-Olry, funded by the European Union and Australia. I did not, however, actually use the four wheel drive. Two wheel drive was quite adequate at the sites visited. The main thing was to have a high clearance and robust tires. The gravel roads were rough and/or potholed but not muddy.



**Fig. 3.** My ZX GrandTiger Turbo 4x4 on the Palikulo Point road (improved in June 2011).

## **BIRDS AND BIRDING**

I skipped Efate completely, after reading some discouraging Internet information on the current situation of endemic species, and focused on Santo. In there, the following three sites were visited, with main emphasis on the Butmas track, at 550-650 meter altitude. My wake up time was around five and departure half an hour later, to allow arrival around sunrise between six and six thirty. Once familiar with the roads, the drive to Butmas track took about an hour, the other locations being 15 to 30 minutes away from Luganville. Even though the largest island of Vanuatu, Santo is small and the new tarmac road has greatly reduced the distances on the east coast.

On the Butmas track and other sites, the main tactic was to drive as slowly as possible, with windows open, and stop after any movement or bird calls were noticed in the bush. Stops were also made at viewpoints and a number of locations where it is possible to pull off the track and walk around, or stand next to the car. As usual, shy species were oftentimes easier to observe when hiding in or behind the vehicle.

## Palikulo Point (Million Dollar Beach)

This site close to Luganville was visited only once. Drive straight east on the main street, past police station junction, along the coast. The road leads to the Palikulo Point, the best bush being before the actual point. The few side roads may also be worth exploring. I went there on the first morning, to secure a road-crossing **Vanuatu Scrub-Fowl**, among numerous **Buff-banded Rails**. The former apparently is also common in this area. Plenty of birds sang in the coastal vegetation along the road but the bush is rather closed, or on private land (**Fig. 4**), making observations a difficult task. At the end of the day, not many target species can be seen at Palikulo Point, the majority of them favoring the hills.



**Fig. 4.** Some of the visitors have misbehaved on private land; an example of Vanuatu pidgin.

## Kole Village Track/Loru Conservation Area

Relatively well signposted (Kole) along the east coast highway, half an hour away from Luganville. I decided not visit the Loru Conservation Area because the target species could be seen in other, more comfortable locations. In fact, each target species, except the **Scrub-Fowl**, is more easily seen on the Butmas Track. A few **Vanuatu (Tanna) Fruit-Doves** were heard or seen at Kole, among the more numerous **Red-bellied Fruit-Doves**. Among the other species worth mentioning were

several **Pacific Imperial Pigeons**, one **McKinlay's Cuckoo-Dove**, a few **Yellow-fronted White-eyes** and two **Buff-bellied Monarchs**. The last species proved to be relatively uncommon, contrary to earlier Internet reports. Perhaps the Kole forest is becoming too degraded for these birds? There certainly was a lot of farming and clearing activity there.

### **Butmas Track**

This was the number one birding site for me in Santo. Once located (**Figs. 5,7,8**), the Butmas road is a peaceful one lane track with good forest all the way, with scattered forest garden plots (banana etc.) by the road. Less than five cars drove the track a day and there were a number of places to pass by. On my first two visits, nobody was seen walking on the road. On the third visit, several people were attending their plots. There probably is some hunting pressure, as mentioned in other reports, especially towards the larger pigeons which were rather shy, but I heard no firearms on three visits. Moreover, pigeons and doves were plentiful.

Once, I was approached by a man at the edge of the village (my turning point). He asked if I was interested in visiting the village and volunteered to be my guide. I declined, politely, explaining that I was there to watch birds along the access road. I was welcome to do so. Another time, I was asked for a lift to Luganville. Again, I declined, pointing out that I was not going to leave in the near future.



**Fig. 5.** On the Butmas Track, the haunt of several Vanuatu endemics.

The dark *sandvicensis* **Emerald Doves** walked on the higher part of the track, being rather reluctant to fly. **Metallic Pigeons** were found to be common (dozens), together with a number of **Pacific Imperial Pigeons**. The sought-after **Baker's Imperial Pigeon** occurs at this level, at least in June, with a few (8) heard and 3 seen. **McKinlay's Cuckoo-Doves** proved to be common and tame, and were frequently spotted by the road, perched on roadside trees or flying across the track. **Vanuatu (Tanna) Fruit Dove** was the overwhelmingly dominant fruit-dove around Butmas, with 25 seen and dozens of others heard. The species is difficult to see perched, but one is eventually likely to get great flight views as long as the weather stays fine. Bird activity died during the few rain showers on the mountains.

**Chestnut-bellied Kingfishers** were frequently heard along the Butmas track, oftentimes close and once three individuals at the same spot. As witnessed also by other Vanuatu visitors, the kingfishers were however frustratingly difficult to see well. Without a good recording to attract them, I had but one split second flight view on the Butmas Track, but scored later higher up (see below). The more common *juliae* **Collared Kingfishers** (a potential split) were recorded on a frequent basis, from Palikulo Point to Butmas.



**Fig. 6.** A *juliae* 'Collared Kingfisher', a forest kingfisher (sub)species at Butmas Track.

I was also looking for **Palm Lorikeets** which may occasionally be seen at low altitudes, even though one normally needs to get above 1.000 m level, but could only find a small number of **Rainbow Lorikeets** (common lower down). *Tenuis* **Cardinal Myzomelas** were scarce, with a total of mere two individuals, or perhaps just one, on three visits. **Long-tailed Trillers**, **Grey** and **Streaked**

**Fantails** were here and there, and a single **New Caledonian Flycatcher** was seen by the main road. **Yellow-fronted White-eye** was by far the most common bird species in Butmas, hundreds of them frequenting the roadside bushes. I did not see any **Silvereyes** there, despite the abundance of the species on lower altitudes.

**Southern Shrikebills** were very common (dozens) and a few inquisitive individuals were seen on each visit. Park at a shady spot and they may well come and visit you. **New Hebrides Honeyeaters** had at least three territories along the track. **Buff-bellied Monarchs** were not as common as expected, but were nevertheless recorded each day, also along the main road. Once their call is learned, locating becomes easier. The problem is that the monarch is a hyperactive species, the birds constantly zooming around their thicket territories, never stopping for more than a split second. A single **Rusty-winged Starling** was seen at the edge of Butmas village on the last visit. This probably was a lucky find, even though I have no idea how regular the species is there. It pays to spent plenty of time in this area.



**Fig. 7.** The Palon junction, on the new East Coast Highway. Left to Palon and Butmas.

There are two ways to reach Butmas from Luganville. The better option is to drive the tarmac road up to Palon junction (**Fig. 7**), turn left and continue until a T-junction in the village of Palon, turning right there and driving straight on until a Y-junction appears (**Fig. 8**; left to Butmas, no sign), about 10 km later. The other road connection which starts close to Luganville and goes via Tanafo may

appear inviting on a map, but is actually very slow and badly potholed. In general, the quality of the road improves as one approaches the Butmas Y-junction from either direction, or drives beyond it, as there is very little traffic on this part of the road.



**Fig. 8.** The Y-fork: left to Butmas at an altitude between 500 and 600 meters.

The right hand of the Y-fork (main road) runs at a high altitude (650 m?) for about four kilometers, with good forest (some mossy trees) and good visibility. The bird species were the same as on the Butmas Track. Two **Baker's Imperial Pigeons** gave great flight views and **Melanesian Cuckoo-Shrikes** were particularly common there. A male **Chestnut-bellied Kingfisher** was well visible 200 meters on the right after the Y-junction, by a forest stream (**Fig. 9**). It took me three visits to see one of these forest interior birds well. Taking a photograph was not easy with a Lumix pocket camera.





**Fig. 9.** A male **Chestnut-bellied Kingfisher** at Butmas. One has to be patient to see the skulking forest birds.

## **FINAL WORDS**

Espiritu Santo was a great place to visit for forest birdwatching. In retrospect, I would recommend Palikulo Point for the **Vanuatu Scrub-Fowl**, and then the Butmas Track, which had all the other endemic species, and might, with luck and persistence, produce one or two of the ones I missed: **Santa Cruz Ground-Dove**, **Palm Lorikeet** and **Melanesian Thicketbird**. For **Mountain Starling** one definitely needs to organize an expedition above 1.000 meters, spent some time up there and be lucky.

There is plenty of exploration potential in Vanuatu, time permitting. On my Vanuatu map, there was a road from Luganville to Narango and Ukoro, and a track up to 1.000 meters from there. If drivable, or improved, a 4x4 track such as this would be the answer to the search for high altitude species in Santo.