



PALAU JUNE 2010 —

UPDATE INFORMATION FOR GLOBETROTTING BIRDERS

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Palau is a group of tropical islands and an independent nation some distance to the east of Southern Philippines, in the southwestern corner of the Pacific Ocean. The island nation is perhaps best known for its Rock Islands and diving waters. Divers tell fellow divers to think twice before visiting Palau because after the visit other diving destinations may just not do it anymore. One has to return to Palau, which is not the most economical place to travel to. The flights are costly and the connections few. However, as a part of a round-a-world tour the price of the visit may be reduced in a very significant way. I myself had the Star Alliance RTW tickets, flying in from Guam, via Yap with Continental Micronesia, and returning the same way.



Fig. 1. The world-famous Rock Islands consist of large islands and rock islets such as these.

In regard to birds, Palau clearly has the highest diversity of species in Micronesia. The number of migratory species is much higher than on islands further away from the neighboring continents of Asia and Australia. Moreover, Palau has no less than thirteen endemic species: **Palau Owl**, **Micronesian Megapode**, **Palau Fruit Dove**, **Palau Ground Dove**, **Palau Swiftlet**, **Palau Kingfisher**, **Palau Cicadabird**, **Morningbird**, **Mangrove Flycatcher**, **Palau Fantail**, **Palau Bush Warbler**, **Dusky White-eye** and **Giant White-eye**. There are also regional endemics, such as **Caroline Islands White-eye**, **Micronesian Starling** and **Micronesian Myzomela**, and other difficult to locate species, such as **Nicobar Pigeon**. All of them may be seen on a few day visit based in Koror, the capital.

When in Palau, it is not that expensive at all. I stayed at Guest Lodge Motel (680-488-6320/6321, info@guestlodgepalau.com, free shuttle), right in the center of Koror but away from noise, on a side street (see satellite image at their home page at www.guestlodgepalau.com), unlike for example the Tree-D. They charged USD 55.00 for one person in a double with air-con, television and fridge. Koror has everything one needs abroad. Supermarkets, take-away shops and post office are in a short walking distance. The guesthouse building itself may not look appealing but the rooms were very nice and, most importantly, the Filipino lady who ran the place did an excellent job. Laundry was ready in one hour, any time of the day (USD 2.50 per a bag), as there is a Laundromat on site. The gentleman who did the free airport shuttles was also very nice and helpful.

In regard to birding sites, the main thing is to find a way to reach two key sites: Ngeruktabel Island (also known as Urukthapel) and its German Lighthouse/Japanese Military Trail, and Ulong Island, the filming site of Survivor Palau and a popular lunch stop for dive operators. The third important site is the Long Island Park, a park and a public swimming site in Koror, along a short causeway to Malakal Island. The causeway meets the tip of Long Island (Ngermalk) at a closed Mobil Station, by which the (free) access to the park is located. The gate closes at 6 PM. After hours, one may park outside, by the gate, and walk in.

There may not be any need to visit other places to see the species mentioned above, but there are other interesting birding sites close by. In Malakal, there is the Koror wastewater treatment works by the Icebox Park, the favorite of local birders,

and there are extensive tidal flats along the Koror – Arakabesan causeway. In Babeldaob, the main island, the recently established Ngermeskang bird reserve (signposted along the main highway) is another option for forest birding.

Not familiar with the current conditions, I emailed many messages to various operators in Koror, including the birding pal and kayak trip operator Ron Leidich (no replies, probably more into paying customers), but got only few responses. The plan was to join a diving party to Ulong Island, to be dropped there in the morning and picked up after the divers had finished their business. Unfortunately, there is no way one can do a reservation beforehand, unless one is ready to pay a group rate (USD 250). Diving is subservient to tidal conditions and decisions to go are often made just 10-20 hours ahead. Therefore, the best thing to do is to visit the diving shops, notably Fish 'n Fins and Sam's Diving Tours, right after arrival, and to continue to do so until the two islands are visited.

I did the close by Ngeruktabel (10 minutes one way) by renting a solo boat ride at Sam's for USD 50. For Ulong, I had visited six diving operators by early afternoon and had heard a unanimous 'no' from all of them. Few hours later, I arrived at the motel to hear that Fish 'n Fins would go after all in the next morning. The German manager, Tuwi, a birder herself, had called to tell the news. The tides had changed and everybody followed suit. Fish 'n Fins charged USD 45 for the ride (35 minutes one way), 5-10 dollars more than others, when available. A picnic lunch would have been an additional USD 5. One also needs to buy a government permit to visit the Rock Islands. It currently is USD 25 if you do not go to the famous Jellyfish Lake, but prices tend to go up. Palau increased its tourist departure tax in June 2010. The operators will pick you up at your accommodation and provide the return trip, too.

During the periods of waiting on the first day, I went to Long Island Park by taxi (USD 3), starting my birdwatching there at 6.30. Later on, I rented a semi-private Mitsubishi SUV with the help of the Filipino lady, for about (cannot remember exactly) USD 45 per day, to visit the sites around Koror and in Malakal, Arakabesan and Babeldaob. I also did it to get away from the heat. It is very hot and humid in Palau around noon. Driving was easy, with the exception of afternoon traffic jams in Koror, when everybody hurries to shops and home. The Guest Lodge Motel has its private parking off street.



Fig. 2. One of the basic requirements of a globetrotting birder; a rental vehicle.

SITES (AND SPECIES)

Long Island Park

The park is very easy to reach and locate on the only main road and causeway between the centre of Koror and Malakal Island. It is well visible on the left, at the foot of the high slope of Ngermalk Island. I walked in, had a look on the planted trees and followed the edge to the forested cliff. After the open flat sand, the shoreline gets narrower but can nevertheless be followed for perhaps 250 meters, in a part of a park seldom visited by day visitors and with good numbers of birds. It is important to arrive early (or late), because it is going to be pretty hot after 9 AM (decrease in visible bird activity). For owling, it is best to park out of the gate (there is plenty of space), leave no valuables on the seats, and walk in.

I went there for two and half hours on the first morning. A few seabird species could be seen in the close by channel. The slopes had five **Palau Fruit Doves**, well visible in flight and on branches. **Palau Swifts** were common, just like anywhere in the town. A **Collared Kingfisher** (*teraokai*) on the shore, an always interesting species for its potential for future splits, was accompanied by a **Palau Kingfisher** half way up the slope. Two female **Palau Cicadabirds** also stayed in the forest, in this (only?) reliable site for the species. A **Mangrove Flycatcher** was in planted palms and gave excellent views – I never saw another one in Palau! Three **Palau Fantails** were recorded at the forest edge, together with eight **Caroline Islands** and twenty **Dusky White-eyes**. Two **Blue-faced Parrot-finches**, a rare species in Palau, completed the picture, together with many **Micronesian Starlings** and **Myzomelas**.

Photographing the birds was difficult with a pocket camera. They were not close enough. At other sites, light or focusing were the problems.



Fig. 3. Koror, with Ngermalk Island. Long Island Park is on the left, on the other side. Malakal Island shows on the right.

The next day, in the evening, I visited the Long Island Park at sunset for **Palau Owls**. One had already been heard calling by the G. L. Motel in the previous evening, despite rain. I did not walk far, but stopped by small shelters with a good view of the forested slope. **Palau Fruit Doves** called till sunset but were replaced by three **Palau Owls** soon after. The calls are not really that similar; it is easy to tell a pigeon from an owl. It was, however, next to impossible to get good views of the owls at this site. If interested, look for other options described in other Palau trip reports. Dozens of **Palau Fruit Bats** and **Pacific Sheat-tailed Bats** can be seen anywhere in Koror at dusk. I also saw a fly-by (high) evening **Nicobar Pigeon** from the motel balcony.

German Lighthouse Trail

During the WWII, Palau was an important base for Imperial Japanese Forces in the Pacific. The remains of their military activities can be seen on every major island. On Ngeruktabel (Urukthapel), they painstakingly carved a road up from the shore to the highest top in order to install two large naval guns there, with a number of smaller caliber weapons in the surrounding bunkers and other fortifications. The idea was to control the main channels of Rock Islands and the access to Koror, with its harbor, garrison, seaplane hangars etc. Today, the cannons and some ammunition can be found on the track half way up to the mountain. The steep track could have been driven with a 4x4 even today, its steel railings at one narrow spot still completely reliable. The road through pristine forest is called the German Lighthouse Trail.

I went in soon after sunrise and in rain. It was rather dark under the canopy, the historical track and trees creating an eerie atmosphere. Fortunately, the rain stopped after an hour. A slow walk up to the top followed, with a number of stops in places with good view either to canopy or to the forest floor. Six hours were spent on the track, which could have been walked up and down in two hours (one needs to be careful on wet rocks with leaf litter).

One **Micronesian Megapode** was heard calling, too far to be approached. Also **Palau Ground Dove** called, close but in a difficult spot. **Palau Fruit Doves** were very common (50+), unlike **Micronesian Pigeons** (3). **Palau Swifts** were even more numerous. There were dozens of singing **Palau Bush Warblers**, but only two were seen well. Eight **Caroline Islands White-eyes** were recorded, but surprisingly no

Dusky White-eyes. The star birds were the five **Morningbirds** (what a great name!) and nine **Giant White-eyes**. The German Lighthouse Trail is the site in Palau for latter species, the peculiar *Megazosterops*. One introduced **Eclectus Parrot** flew by.



Fig. 4. So much effort and everything lost just when the project was about to be finished! Naval cannons at their end station in the humid gloom of the German Lighthouse Trail.

I was still wet when returning to the landing site. The turquoise water looked inviting and it was time for a nice swim while waiting for the transportation, in the company of a **Collared Kingfisher** and some small silvery turquoise fish. A shark or two may have been lurking around deep down, but there should be no dangerous species in these shallow waters.



Fig. 5. The German Lighthouse Trail landing site.



Fig. 6. A **White-tailed Tropicbird**, a common species throughout the tropical Pacific.

Ulong Island

We left Koror at 8.30 AM and arrived at Ulong Island at 9.05 AM in perfectly calm and sunny weather. The scenic drive along Rock Islands was non-stop in a boat with two 500 horsepower outboard engines. I was dropped in the shallow waters of Ulong Beach. The beach is white and with one of the softest sands in the Pacific. It was going to be mine for four hours, before the others would come back to eat before our return. There was a large vessel parked off the island, a diver liveaboard, but the people on board appeared to be preparing themselves for another dive. Soon, they left towards the Ulong Channel in a fast boat, for **Manta Rays**.

I walked in, left most of my things on a table and went straight away to a short trail by a steep ridge, 30 meters away, following it slowly to the right for 100+ meters, before heading back to the beach and following the shoreline to the camp. More birding around the campsite followed before I could not resist anymore, but went to swim in the lagoon (naked, of course!). A number of colorful fish and a small shark waited in the water. Birding, swimming, birding, swimming and a lunch.

Birdwatching was great! Three almost bald **Micronesian Megapodes** were readily seen, one of them running around our legs at the lunchtime, almost like a domestic chicken. Six adult **Nicobar Pigeons** (shy) were seen well. At least four **Palau Ground Doves** were present, with excellent prolonged views of one. These are the species which make visiting Ulong worth one's while. Additionally, more than twenty **Palau Fruit Pigeons**, one **Sulphur-crested Cockatoo** (introduced) and two **Eclectus Parrots** (likewise), one **Collared Kingfisher**, one **Morningbird** (great views), five **Palau Fantails**, ten **Micronesian Starlings**, four **Micronesian Myzomelas**, eight **Palau Bush Warblers**, three **Caroline Islands White-eyes** and six **Dusky White-eyes**.

The seabirds seen on the way to Ulong Island and at the beach were terns, noddies and tropicbirds: 10+ **White-tailed Tropicbirds**, about 50 **Black-naped Terns**, three **Bridled Terns**, a single **Sooty Tern**, about 40 **White Terns**, about 30 **Brown Noddies** and over 50 **Black Noddies**. **Palau Owl** can sometimes be seen during the day at the campsite, being probably attracted by rodents (more below).



Fig. 7. Ulong diver camp. The trail to birds starts behind the shelter, to the right.



Fig. 8. The turquoise, clear waters of Ulong Island.



Fig. 9. The diver boats arrived for a lunch break and my Robinson Crusoe hours were over.

A less pleasant feature of the Ulong Island were its many bold rats, both **Black** and **Norwegian**, the heritage of the wreck of the East India Company Ship 'Antelope' in 1784. The rats swam to the island and have successfully lived there for almost 250 years and probably over 100 generations, most recently on the scraps of tourists, not to mention the eggs and chicks of endangered birds species...

The return trip took much longer because we went in through the Rock Islands, visiting some of its sights, and took a longer route back to the Fish 'n Fins private jetty. Fish 'n Fins is located some distance from the other dive shops in Malakal, on the Koror Island side at the end of the road which passes the municipality rubbish dump, another site for shorebirds and **Rufous Night-Herons**, among other things. I never went there, partly because of the foul smell, partly because the low likelihood of new species. The wastewater works is more pleasant for similar species.



Fig. 10. One of the Rock Island sights, a natural arch, on the way back to Koror. Part of the large Ngeruktabel Island shows in the back right.

Koror wastewater treatment plant

The wastewater works has a pleasant pair of settling pools behind grassy embankments at the southern tip of Malakal Island, opposite the Icebox Park. Drive to the end of the Malakal road and through a gate indicating restricted access. Birdwatchers are tolerated. I drove up right at the edge of forest, after two buildings (left), and parked on the embankment. Most of the birds can be seen from this point, especially if one has a telescope, and the reedy bit is but a short walk away. There were mostly the common Palau species such as **Yellow Bittern**, **Rufous Night-Heron**, **Cattle Egret**, **Red Junglefowl**, **Banded Rail** and **Greenshank** but I also saw a **White-winged Tern** and two **Siberian Tattlers** on the two visits to the site. It is not a priority site but a place to visit after the main target species have been located.



Fig. 11. Koror Wastewater Works ponds, my car at the suggested parking site.



Fig. 12. Opposite view, from car towards the Icebox Park. Reeds on the right.

Other sites

The northern causeway to Arakabesan tidal flats had a **Little Egret** (**Pacific Reef** is the common egret) and a **Snowy Plover**. A short stop by the main road at the Ngermeskang Bird Sanctuary, in Babeldaob, produced good views of three **Micronesian Pigeons**, once again on dead trees. The species appears to be common there. Otherwise, my trip to Babeldaop was more about sightseeing, including some WWII Japanese machinery, than birdwatching. It was hot and all the species had already been located. I was mostly trying to see the local subspecies of **White-breasted Wood-Swallow**, which may eventually be split as a full species, but I failed to find it.

AT THE END OF THE DAY

Palau is a great travel and birdwatching destination. While there, one needs to have to be active and play by the ear to get to the key island sites. Everything is, however, likely to be ok as the Palauan are very helpful and welcoming, and the services are both efficient and reliable. The Palau Minister of Natural Resources, Environment and Tourism, Harry Fritz, whom I accidentally met twice, can be happy with the situation. There is a large variety of accommodation, including some great budget choices. Food is excellent and easily available, and driving uncomplicated. It is also a safe destination. Last but not least, the protected Rock Islands and the surrounding reefs are one of the really unique places on Earth, and worth a visit even if it is going to be more expensive than on average, because of the long distance to most tourism originating regions. My every euro was well spent, well spent indeed.





Fig. 13. My private haven for four hours, the Ulong Island Beach.