



## TAHITI IN JULY 2011 –

# UPDATE INFORMATION FOR VISITING BIRDERS

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Among the far away tropical Pacific paradises, Tahiti belongs to the same somewhat overrated category as Hawaii. They are internationally marketed as something very special but the reality does not agree with imagery. Both have their strengths but are also crowded and expensive, especially in the case of Oahu, Hawaii, and Papeete, the capital of Tahiti. The real gems of the Pacific region can be found in Micronesia, Tuamotus, Marquesas, Gambiers and other more relaxed small island destinations, where also the cost of travel decreases in a major way.

Nevertheless, Tahiti is worth a visit. The beauty of Polynesia, the fragrant smell of flowers and the blue-green lagoons are there, especially in Tahiti Iti and other more remote corners of the island. Tahiti is the gateway to French Polynesia and has five endemic bird species to look for: **Grey-green Fruit-Dove**, **Tahiti Kingfisher**, **Tahiti Swiftlet**, **Tahiti Reed Warbler** and the critically endangered **Tahiti Monarch**. The few **Chattering Kingfishers** are very difficult to locate. The **Polynesian Pigeon** became, unfortunately, extinct already a decade ago, surviving only in Makatea (Tuamotu Islands).



**Fig. 1.** In French Polynesia, most women and many men keep a fragrant flower behind their ear.

## ACCOMMODATION, CAR RENTAL AND FOOD

Accommodation is expensive in Tahiti but it is possible to cut the expenses down and find more comfort away from Papeete and its surroundings. The birds are, after all, not in Papeete. I stayed at Pueu Village in Tahiti Iti ([www.pueuvillage.com](http://www.pueuvillage.com)), about one hour drive away from the main birdwatching destinations and 15 minutes away from Taravao, a small town with excellent supermarkets, Bank of Polynesia for currency exchange (not available at Faa'a International Airport arrivals!) and the Manu (Society for Bird Protection in French Polynesia) office. At the Pueu village, turn left soon after the Pueu church on the right. It is a 1 h 15 minutes drive from Faa'a airport if you do not do the drive in late afternoon, the period of traffic jams.

In French Polynesia, European Union, the local currency is XPF, the franc of French overseas territories, even though credit card payments may be made in euro. The XPF rate is fixed with euro. In downtown Papeete, it is possible to change foreign currencies to XPF without commission, at Broadway (a shop). Otherwise, go to Bank of Polynesia.



**Fig. 2. Brown Noddies** breed in the coconuts of Pueu Village in July.

Pueu Village has stylish and comfortable bungalows with kitchen and fridge. Expect to find some groceries (butter, milk, juice etc.) for breakfasts in the fridge. The rate is XPF 10.000 (€84) per night, a good deal in Tahiti, especially if shared. It is a peaceful place with its own deep lagoon for

swimming and snorkeling. There were no other customers during my stay, before the peak tourist season in August. Victor the manager (pueuvillage@mail.pf) will answer your emails promptly and accepts credit cards. The family speaks excellent English and is always there to help you. All in all, it is a nice and convenient place to stay with private parking next to one's bungalow. Do not, however, park under a coconut tree! The trees carry a lot of nuts and they keep on falling down every night, especially if it is windy.

I rented my car with Europcar, the largest operator on the island with an office at Faa'a airport and competitive rates. A Renault Clio Campus was quite sufficient and handy for driving in Tahiti. The traffic was not difficult at all, with mostly 50 to 60 km/h speed limits and one section of 80 to 90 km/h south of Papeete. The consumption of fuel being low, the cost of gasoline is not a problem.

Many people complain about the price of food in Tahiti. The high cost is probably true if one has meals in restaurants, especially in the more expensive tourist resorts. With accommodation such as mine, cooking for oneself was possible. I did not buy one of the 10 kg roadside fresh Yellowfin Tunas, €8.50 each, but did my shopping in the Carrefour chain Champion supermarkets of Taravao. The price of food was slightly lower than in Europe, fresh fish being clearly less expensive and some imported items more expensive. Moreover, there are congregations of roadside fast food stalls with cheap takeaways such as pizza here and there. Some supermarkets are open also on Sunday. All in all, Tahiti beats Hawaii in the price/quality ratio.



**Fig. 3.** A corner of a supermarket in Taravao; good selection for home cooking or take away.

The drinks are there too with a wide selection of bottled water, soft drinks, beer, wine and strong alcohols. The imported alcohols are pretty expensive, including all French wines, but Tahiti produces its own lager, Hinano Tahiti, a brand one is not likely to miss. In case you like lager, a cold can or two may be pretty refreshing after a day of birdwatching in the warm conditions. Personally, I preferred water and the quality fruit juices with no added sugar, such as the South African Ceres products.



Fig. 4. Some of the common lagers in the supermarkets. XPF200 equals €1.70.

## BIRDING SITES

### Papenoo Valley

The Papenoo Valley is located one hour drive north from Pueu Village along the east coast highway, a less congested route with no need to enter Papeete. On the first visit, it was raining steadily and bird observations were scarce. Moreover, the road eventually started to get flooded next to a roadside waterfall. On the second visit, the weather was very fine and the few species were relatively easy to observe, with the exception of **Grey-green Fruit-Dove**. The weather changes fast on the mountains. Just go there to see how things develop and be prepared to more than one visit. This advice applies to all birding locations in the oftentimes rainy Tahiti.

I turned left into the valley after crossing Papenoo River on the coastal highway and followed the initially paved road through some gravel yards and truck traffic, the road becoming increasingly (an understatement) potholed around the point where the tarmac ended. Later on, I crossed the river on a one-lane bridge and continued to a second river crossing. Most birds were seen 100 to 400 meters before the second 4x4 crossing.

**Tahiti Kingfishers** were loud and conspicuous, with three pairs and a single one seen at the spot portrayed in **Fig. 5**. **Tahiti Reed Warblers** were equally easy, with three birds in the same spot and four others along the road, both dark and light morphs. Only one **Grey-green Fruit-Dove** was seen, sitting on an open branch in a hillside tree. None were heard calling. There are no **Tahiti Swiftlets** in the Papenoo Valley – no need to scan the sky for the species.

Around midday, many tourist jeep safari 4x4 vehicles entered this supposedly ‘remote’ part of the island, the sense of wilderness adventure perhaps being slightly dampened by the presence of a regular Clio on the same track... Well, they went all the way across the island. There were plenty of mosquitoes in the Papenoo Valley, bring your insect repellent.



**Fig. 5.** Papenoo Valley: this spot had both **Tahiti Reed Warblers** and **Tahiti Kingfishers**.



**Fig.6.** A male **Tahiti Kingfisher**. The breast band is rather weak, contrary to some illustrations.



**Fig. 7.** **White Terns** are not so common in Tahiti. Look for them along the Taravao – Papeete road.

## Papehue Valley

This is the site for **Tahiti Monarch**, a critically endangered species with about 50 individuals left. The valley is closed from public as a special reserve. One needs to arrange the visit with Manu, the Society for Bird Protection in French Polynesia, which has its office in Taravao (access guidelines at [www.manu.pf](http://www.manu.pf)). It is good idea to contact Anne Gouni, the president of the organization, and/or Thomas Ghestemme, the person in charge of Tahiti Monarch conservation, beforehand. Their emails are [agouni@manu.pf](mailto:agouni@manu.pf) and [tghestemme@manu.pf](mailto:tghestemme@manu.pf).

Do not expect immediate response because these people are often in the field for weeks, in the remote corners of French Polynesia, facing some rough conditions in their struggle to save the endemic birds. They have published a book in French, *Oiseaux du Fenua – Tahiti et ses îles*, with up to date information and great photos. Reading French is not as difficult as speaking it. With luck one may find a copy in Pepeeete. I bought mine at the Manu office, but they said it was their last one for sale.

Laurent works on site on daily basis, looking after the place and its hundreds of rat control devices and may guide one to the right spot. A donation of XPF 5.000 (€42) is expected by Manu, apparently including a membership and a subscription of their journal. The trail is one kilometer long and relatively level, an easy task for fit birders and possible for also us fat and crippled ones. There are two streams to cross but they are narrow and shallow, unless it has just rained on the high slopes. At some points, slippery rocks and fallen African Tulip Trees create obstacles.

**Tahiti Swiftlets** (more than 10) were seen already at the entrance gate, together with the very dark nominate subspecies of **Pacific Swallows**. Several **Tahiti Kingfishers** were seen in the forest and **Grey-green Fruit-Doves** called at times. We had no time to look for them because rain could have arrived any time before the star species was located. Two **Tahiti Monarchs** were eventually seen at the first monarch territory, an adult male with a subadult female.

The monarchs have very little tolerance towards feathered intruders (e.g. kingfishers) and will come to inspect any unusual sounds. Laurent tried to bang some trees with no success. I happened to have a whistle in my pocket and blowing it gave immediate results. Otherwise we probably would have needed to wait for some time, because the territory was a sizable one and the birds arrived from a far away corner.

The next day, on my way to Faa'a departure I stopped again at the Papehue Valley gate, to have another look at the swiftlets. Laurent was there again, having worked for hours to cut a large Tulip Tree which had fallen across the trail. These trees, a menace to the indigenous flora, grow and spread fast but have it difficult to hold their balance in the foreign terrain.



**Fig. 8.** A **Tahiti Swiftlet** at Papehue Valley – a scarce species present only close to breeding sites.



**Fig. 9.** The nominate *tahitica* **Pacific Swallows** are very dark – a future split?

## Utuupai Point

At first glance, Tahiti is a next to hopeless place for seabird observations from land. The lagoons surrounding the island are wide and the few places where they are not tend to be far away from tourist accommodations. Close to Pueu Village, I tested two locations: Tautira (**Fig. 11**) and Utuupai Point (**Fig. 12**). The first one proved to be a bit too flat and low for good views, even though **Tahiti Petrels** could readily be observed there any time of the day.

The latter one was more productive. Utuupai Point is about 10 km north of Taravao on the east coast road, after Otuofai and a large bridge across a river. Right next to the highway, there is small space to park for one or two cars by the edge of a cliff. Having a car right next to you is a definite plus on the rainy east coast, where short but heavy showers occur on a regular basis.

The observation conditions are reasonable. There is a gap in the reefs right in front of the site, with huge waves entering the shoreline. Especially in the evening, **Tahiti Petrels** gather there, flying around at some distance and eventually flying up to the mountains and their nesting sites. Short observation times (2 x 30 minutes) produced up to 300 individuals. Interestingly, one **Kirimati Shearwater** was seen on both occasions, passing towards Tahiti Iti. Otherwise, the widespread pelagic species such as **White-tailed Tropicbirds**, **Brown Noddies**, **Swift Terns**, a single **Grey-backed Tern** and few **Lesser Frigatebirds** were recorded. I wonder if the harbor of Papeete may be entered? It is partly built on the edge of a reef, with views to deeper waters.



**Fig. 10.** The Utuupai Point seabird observation site.



**Fig. 11.** The shoreline in Tautira and a **Wandering Tattler** in front.



**Fig. 12.** The (Gallic) **Junglefowl** and other introductions thrive on Tahiti.