



# RANGIROA, TUAMOTU ISLANDS

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In July 2011, I visited Rangiroa, one of the largest atolls in the world and the main island of the Tuamotus in French Polynesia, for two days (15<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup>). The majority of the islets which form the atoll are in their natural state, albeit with introduced rats, the population of 2.500 people living on a short stretch between Avatoru and Tiputa passes. Rangiroa Airport is located in the center of this area and is well serviced by Air Tahiti, with flights from Papeete, Bora Bora and some other atolls (luggage limit 20 kg + only 3 kg hand luggage). The purpose of the visit was to see three endemic land bird species – **Tuamotu (Polynesian) Ground-Dove**, **Blue Lorikeet** and **Tuamotu Reed Warbler** – and to look for some of the interesting seabirds of the archipelago: **Phoenix Petrel**, **Murphy's Petrel** and **Kermadec Petrel**. All these species were seen, but keeping one's eyes open in the general area was not enough for **Atoll Fruit Dove**, which is a scarce inhabitant of the 200 km long ring of motus (small islets). They are there, but there is no stake out, as far as I know.



**Fig. 1.** Rangiroa Atoll: the lagoon is so wide that one does not see the islets on the opposite side.

June, July and August are not necessarily the best times to visit Rangiroa. This is the season of strong winds and traveling to the motus becomes a bit of a struggle. Do not be fooled by the thought of a secluded lagoon. In Rangiroa, the lagoon is large enough to produce five meter waves and one has to travel about 90 km by boat to visit both the **Tuamotu Ground-Dove** and **Blue Lorikeet** sites. On the other hand, the rough seas of the season greatly increase one's chances to get close views of seabirds, at observation points on the seaside shores of the atoll. In September and October, the sea is much calmer and the motus a pleasure to visit, but the seawatch scene may be less interesting. One option is to stay long and look for a calm day to do the boat trip, but there are no guarantees and one may need to wait for many days. On the other hand, diving and snorkeling is a good way to pass time in Rangiroa, sharks being especially plentiful.

Many thanks to those who had provided information on Rangiroa in the Internet, and especially to Tun Pin Ong , whose travel blog and emails encouraged me to go there and had the vital pieces of information in regard to **Tuamotu Ground-Dove**. There is a great local book in French, *Oiseaux du Fenua – Tahiti et ses iles*, by Anne Gouni and Thierry Zysman, for those lucky enough to find a copy in Papeete. I bought mine at the Manu (Societe d'Ornithologie de Polynesie) office in Taravao, but they said it was their last for sale copy.

## **ACCOMMODATION AND ACCESS**

I stayed at Pension Loyna ([www.pensionloyna.com](http://www.pensionloyna.com)), a family business run by Loyna Faarea with neat and affordable (XPF 7.500; €63) bungalows. The rate includes half board (breakfast and dinner) and airport transfers. I can fully recommend this peaceful, hospitable and well run place, where the dinners are shared by an extended multicultural family. English is spoken very well, in case one does not speak French. The location of the pension is very good, with seabird observation site only two hundred meters away and Tevahine Dreams, the place of Norbert Lau ([www.tevahinedream.com](http://www.tevahinedream.com)), one key person for the Ground-Dove Motu (private land) access, equally close by the main road. Tevahine Dreams also has bungalows with half board, at a significantly higher rate.

Mr. Lau may organize the boat trip in his own boat, in cooperation with MANU representative and skipper Ludwig Blanc ([merituams@hotmail.com](mailto:merituams@hotmail.com)). MANU is managing the motu and look after the critically endangered **Tuamotu Ground-Dove's** population, attempting to increase it with a rat eradication program in the neighboring motus. Try Ludwig if Norbert does not reply.

Some snacks were brought in from Papeete, where I stored most of my stuff at the Faa'a Airport left luggage office. Filtered water was provided by the pension. The boat trip included snacks (baguette) and water, and a lunch at Blue Lagoon. I was also invited to join a family lunch by my most hospitable hosts on the departure day. Therefore, I had no need to look for lunches in such a short visit. Shops, pizzerias and restaurants are, however, located relatively close by.



**Fig. 2.** An adult **Black Noddy** at nest – my favorite Pacific seabird.



**Fig. 3.** ...and a juvenile one at another picturesque nest.

## BIRDS

### Tuamotu Ground-Dove (*Gallicolumba erythroptera*)

The species is restricted to a rat-free motu about one hour away from the main island. The motu has been left unnamed in this report because of conservation needs. One needs a permit (see above) and boat transport to get there, and the latter one is rather expensive, partly because of high gasoline consumption. In July 2011, Mr. Lau charged XPF 35.000 (EUR 270) for the 90 km full day excursion with lunch. This is of course a rather steep rate for one person, even in the expensive French Polynesia. A trip to Blue Lagoon only is XPF 7.500. The boat had a crew of three persons who worked hard to tackle the rough sea and the two landings on the reefs. In both cases, we had to walk about 100 meters in the sea, water initially chest to waist deep, in order to land on these little paradise islets. Fortunately, the underwater terrain was mostly solid coral sand. There were many sharks around, but not aggressive or dangerous ones.

The Ground-Dove Motu is full of breeding seabirds with plenty of photography opportunities. The scenery is very colorful, with the sun and turquoise water. The birds are tame and may fly or walk to you, instead of going away. As we approached the islet, **Brown Boobies** were the first ones to greet us with curiosity, flying right above us. The **Tuamotu Ground-Doves** themselves, once located, were frequently approaching too close to be photographed, a situation rarely encountered with birds. Some of the common breeding species included **Red-footed Boobies**, **Great and Lesser Frigatebirds**, **Sooty Terns**, **Black and Grey Noddies**, and **White Terns**. **Bristle-thighed Curlews** (4) were present also in July, at the season the majority of them are breeding in the Arctic North America.

As already hinted, the boat ride was rather rough, especially from a viewpoint of a tourist with no experience with local conditions. On the first leg to the motu, I regretted doing the ride several times, hanging there for my life and being completely soaked with salty seawater, including eyes. The second leg to Blue Lagoon was shorter, and at moments almost enjoyable despite the rough sea, but with alarmingly high waves towards the end. The third leg started with an outboard engine (single 100 horse power) failure and a narrow escape before hitting the reef, thanks to another boat which rescued us. The one+ hour drive back was made against high waves, with countless heavy hits, alarming tilts and a few airborne situations (both the boat and us), my lower back banging against the boat (all bruised and swollen afterwards).

I kept my eyes closed for much of the time, not sure if we would survive it in the case of another engine problem. Once when I opened them, I saw the crest of a huge wave half a meter higher than us, with a shark riding inside it. For a long moment, we tried to follow a larger vessel breaking the waves ahead of us. They took video of us and showed it at the shore – it did not look like a joyride from that angle either!

Well, it all probably was a piece of cake to our skipper Ludwig, even though Norbert said that if the conditions were any rougher, they would not go out with tourists! Bring waterproof bags for sensitive items and wear clothes and shoes which do not mind getting wet with salt.



**Fig. 4.** The Ground-Dove Motu, a paradise for birds.

### **Blue Lorikeet (*Vini peruviana*)**

The pretty lorikeet is a rare visitor in the populated areas, due to introduced predators, but easy to observe in its favorite haunts of coconut grove motus such as the Blue Lagoon site, where tourists travel to swim, to grill their body and to feed themselves and the many habituated sharks. Even though well used to people, the lorikeets were wary and got down to human level only occasionally, spending most of their time high up in the coconut trees, cuddling together like only lovers may do (**Fig. 6**). I had a chance to photograph one close at eye-level, but was disturbed at the critical moment by the operator of another vessel, who demanded me to stop birding and have my lunch at once. I wish he could have waited ten seconds...



**Fig. 5.** An adult male **Tuamotu Ground-Dove**. Copyright Ludwig Blanc.



**Fig. 6.** A pair of **Blue Lorikeets**, easy to see but not so easy to photograph without a long lens.

The Blue Lagoon offers many opportunities for photography. The other breeding birds are also well used to tourists and do not mind close approach. **Swift Terns** and **Lesser Frigatebirds** attend the shark feeding sessions. There are **Coconut Crabs** (**Fig. 7**) around, too, not to mention underwater photography. I can still remember the sight of colorful reed fish dashing after a piece of apple in the turquoise water, and the four sharks which zoomed in, too late for pickings.



**Fig. 7.** A **Coconut Crab** in hand.

#### **Tuamotu Reed Warbler (*Acrocephalus atyphas*)**

On the first afternoon, in light wind, two **Tuamotu Reed Warblers** were singing in a coconut grove right next to Pension Loyna. The next morning, in stronger winds, no birds could be located. Beware of falling coconuts at this site, and at Blue Lagoon, especially if it is windy! A rather obliging individual (**Fig. 8**) occupied the Blue Lagoon motu, defending its territory with a last year's nest hanging on a rather exposed place in a low bush. It is so strange to see an *Acrocephalus* living in coconut trees on a sandy, open islet...

The species is widespread but skulking and difficult to see despite the relatively open habitats it appears to favor. There are many places in a coconut tree to hide in for a small brown bird and one needs to be patient to get good views. Ludwig did excellent job in mimicking the bird and teasing it to sing out in the open.



**Fig. 8.** Tuamotu Warbler in its favorite environment, on top of a coconut tree.



**Fig. 9.** Feeding the sharks, and **Swift Terns**, at Blue Lagoon.

## Seabirds

The islets of Rangiroa are flat and this limits the visibility in seabird observation. The site I used was opposite to Pension Loyna on the seaside shore (**Figs. 10 & 11**). Go out of the gate on the lagoon side and follow a right hand path along the pension fence to the opposite direction for less than 100 meters until arriving on a gravel road. Continue forward past three houses on the right and you will arrive on the shore. By the last house, there is a low stone wall on which one may sit (I asked for permit) to get slightly above the shore level. The only problem at this site is the guard dogs of the houses. They will bark and run towards you and some of them look lethal. They did not, however, bite me and soon got used to the visits. Locals walk this road all the time.

I went there early in the morning and late in the afternoon, when the light conditions were the most favorable. The seabird traffic did, however, not cease during the day. There were hundreds of **Red-footed Boobies** and a few **Masked** ones. **Brown** and especially **Black Noddies** were even more numerous, **Grey Noddies** (many dozens) and **White Terns** were also very common. Up to 10 **Wandering Tattlers** fed and roosted on the shore, with a single **Pacific Golden Plover**. **Grey-backed** and **Swift Terns** patrolled the shoreline, with a total of the former 20 recorded in the six hours of observation.

Among the best birds was a single **Murphy's Petrel (*Pterodroma ultima*)**, with great views, on 15<sup>th</sup> of July (What a strong flyer!) and a splendid white morph **Kermadec Petrel (*Pterodroma neglecta*)** on the 17<sup>th</sup>. **Tahiti/Phoenix Petrels** initially created some identification problems until it became clear that both species were present. Out of the two dozen birds seen, three showed the white throats and white lesser coverts indicative of **Phoenix Petrel (*Pterodroma alba*)**. According to Gouni & Zysman, the status of the species in the Tuamotus is unclear. The **Phoenix Petrels** should be more common around the Marquesas, even though I only identified one there, Nuku Hiva lacking in productive observation points. In Tahiti, the **Tahiti Petrel** is abundant.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

In retrospect, time permitting, I should probably have made the Ground-Dove Motu and Blue Lagoon visits separately on two days. The total price would possibly have been lower and there would have been more time to stay on each islet. Especially the first motu was like a birder's paradise and would have merited more onshore hours.

The domestic flights are relatively expensive on Air Tahiti, with its monopoly of traffic, but the smaller islands are very rewarding to visit. The people are welcoming and the services are good. It is not a problem at all to organize things by oneself while in French Polynesia. The prices are a bit higher than many other parts of the Pacific, but the taxes included have also been spent to create better than average infrastructure in the region. The number of species is limited but the quality of observations is high. These features make French Polynesia an attractive destination for birders.



**Fig. 10.** The stone wall of my seabird observation point, close to Pension Loyna...



**Fig. 11.** ...and the sea in July.



**Fig. 12.** A juvenile **Red-footed Booby**, eyes fixed on rare human visitors.



**Fig. 13.** A **White-browed Hawk-Moth** in the Pension Loyna room, a messenger of spirit world according to Polynesian tradition. The message delivered, I carried it out in the night.