



UA HUKA AND NUKU HIVA : BIRDING THE MARQUESAS IN JULY 2011

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In July 2011, I had a chance to stay three days in Nuku Hiva and two days in Ua Huka, in the archipelago of Marquesas, French Polynesia. As the Internet information on these islands is rather limited, I have made this report to help other globetrotting birders to organize their visits to these wonderful islands. The emphasis is on endemic species. Ua Huka in particular is one of the undiscovered gems of French Polynesia and is easily visited by Air Tahiti and Air Moorea flights from Papeete, Tahiti. The flights can be reserved and paid by the Internet, at the Air Tahiti home page. Nuku Hiva being the main island of the Marquesas, there are flights there six days a week. Ua Huka, only 25 minutes away, is served five days a week, at least for the time being. There is a 20+3 kg luggage limit of on flights to Nuku Hiva but somehow nobody protested my 30+ kilos.



Fig. 1. Waiting for the Air Tahiti Nuku Hiva flight, at Faa'a domestic terminal, Papeete.

In Nuku Hiva, everything is made complicated by the fact that the airport is at a desolate dry corner of the island, 1 to 1,5 hour drive from accommodation and other services at Taiohae. Taxis cost XPF 4.000 one way. Moreover, car rental and return is only possible at Taiohae. Add the only gas station (Taiohae harbor) being closed on Sundays and car rental agencies reluctant to service out of office hours to complete the picture. Fortunately, most of the spectacular drive across the highest points of the island (max. 1.000 m) is paved. Only the first five kilometers after the airport is gravel, a consequence of a mismanaged road construction budget. This section becomes dangerously slippery whenever it rains, in other words at some time of almost every day. Experienced with 4x4s, I could not always fully control the car going downhill in these situations.



Fig. 2. Air Moorea flight to Ua Huka is ready for departure.

ACCOMMODATION, MEALS AND TRANSPORTATION

At the time of my visit in Taiohae, some of the few accommodations were closed due to ongoing festival weeks. I opted for staying at Hee Tai Inn (rose.corser@mail.pf), Rose Corser's place, which cost XPF 9.000 per night and had high standard double rooms and dinners for XPF 1.500. Rose is experienced in the business and knows the region well. She was helpful in arranging the car rentals, not to mention accommodation in Ua Huka. I faxed my Ua Huka accommodation to make a reservation, but got no response. Rose called them and made the reservation. Later, I heard that

my fax had been received but the Ua Huka people had decided not to answer it, apparently being afraid of my lack of French language skills, even though the lady of the house spoke English quite well! It is useful to have somebody fluent in English and French on spot to organize things in these situations. Rose also knows bird guides on both islands if you desire to be guided. I don't.

There are several small supermarkets in Taioahe. The one to the left at the junction of the cross-island road had fresh bakery products each morning. The car I got was a new Ford Ranger XLT 4x4. It proved to be fine for the Nuku Hiva roads, even though its front tires were lacking grip because of being so worn out. Ships from Tahiti deliver spare parts to Nuku Hiva only once in two months or so and buying new tires is not a simple matter there. Nevertheless, the two thousand inhabitants own around 600 cars. The cost of rental was XPF 11.000 per day, with insurance.



Fig. 3. Taiohae, the main village of Nuku Hiva, with a perfect natural harbor.

In Ua Huka, everything is much cheaper. It is a small community with 600 inhabitants in three villages, nowadays connected with a perfect paved road. The island reminded me of northern Norway, with its majestic sceneries, open spaces, plenitude of wild flowers and seabird colonies. In there, rain is seldom experienced and winds keep the weather pleasant even during the hottest hours of the day. I stayed at Chez Maurice et Delphine (fax 92 60 55) at Hokatu village. I was the only guest in the seven bungalows and the only passenger on the return flight. Outside the August high season, one apparently may arrive in Ua Huka without a reservation and organize things on

spot. It is, however, a good idea to bring some snacks. The village shops of Ua Huka have limited supplies.

A bungalow on a ridge above the village had an additional bonus, a seabird observation site and view to Motu Hane, a major seabird colony, only 100 meters away. There was 24 h electricity, fridge and dinners at the home of Maurice and Delphine for the two nights, plus airport transfers, and transportation to the Botanical Garden at the other end of the island (15 minute drive), for a total of XPF 14.000, a real bargain (50% of what one spends in Nuku Hiva). A British Hawaiian friend of the family, Simo, was great help in communication but even without his help, things could have been arranged because Delphine speaks some English.



Fig. 4. The scenic coast of Ua Huka.

The Botanical Garden is the place where tour groups take people to see the Ua Huka endemics. I did the same but discovered later on that all species could have been seen at the Hokatu bungalows, too. The target land birds of Ua Huka are pleasantly easy to spot, with perhaps the exception of **Iphis Monarch** which may require a bit more time because of its somewhat skulking habits. Hokatu apparently is a better choice than Hane and Vaipaee, the other villages, for seabirds, but Vaipaee has introduced **Nuku Hiva Pigeons** (locally known as *Upe*), west of the village, in the forested valley behind a ridge. The species is, however, currently very easy to see in Nuku Hiva. Nevertheless, one could consider skipping the complicated Nuku Hiva altogether and focus on Ua Huka, without missing any of the endemics available in this part of the archipelago.

BIRDS

Little White Tern (*Gygis microrhyncha*)

Common both in Nuku Hiva and Ua Huka, oftentimes favoring large trees close to human habitation. There were several dozens both in the villages of Taiohae and Hokatu.



Fig. 5. A juvenile **Little White Tern**, Taiohae, Nuku Hiva.

Nuku Hiva Pigeon (*Ducula galeata*)

At the moment, this peculiar species is easy to observe and photograph at Hikokua archaeological site (**Fig. 6**) in Nuku Hiva, at any time of the day. Early in the morning, there were at least 20 individuals (almost 10% of the population) at the site. The majority of them left by 10 AM, but a few stayed there. The road from Taioahe to Hikokua was mostly fine with a few rough spots after Taipivai, and paved all the way. Drive to Taipivai and turn left towards Hatiheu. Few kilometers before Hatiheu one arrives to very obvious ruins with information tables and large Banyan trees. The pigeons are tame, feeding in trees and bushes around the ruins, together with many **White-capped Fruit-Doves**. One individual was also seen in a roadside tree, uphill from the Taipivai junction, along the cross-island tarmac road. Alternatively, find the **Nukuhiva Pigeon** in Ua Huka.



Fig. 6. The Hikokua archaeological site.



Fig. 7. The *Upe*, Nuku Hiva Pigeon, at Hikokua – about 250 birds exist on two islands.

White-capped Fruit Dove (*Ptilinopus dupetithouarsii*)

Numerous in Nuku Hiva. The first ones will probably be seen by the road during the airport transfer to Taioahe. It is a garden bird in Taioahe and common anywhere in the forested (native forest, not the planted conifers) southern slopes of the island. In Ua Huka, the numbers appeared to be distinctly lower, the species being nevertheless present both at the Botanical Garden and the village of Hokatu.



Fig. 8. A White-capped Fruit-Dove at Hikokua, Nuku Hiva.

Marquesan Swiftlet (*Aerodramus ocistus*)

Common but not really numerous on both islands (**Fig. 10**). They tend to fly low, for example in the garden of Hee Tai Inn, Taioahe, and along the cross-island route. Another airport transfer species, both in Nuku Hiva and Ua Huka.

Northern Marquesan Reed-Warbler (*Acrocephalus percernis*)

Recently split from **Southern Marquesan Warbler** (*A.mendanae*). Abundant species present wherever there are bushes in Nuku Hiva and Ua Huka. The song is rather pleasant for an *Acrocephalus*, a definite plus for such a numerous and vocal species. I could observe this species from the patios of both of my accommodations.



Fig. 9. Northern Marquesan Warblers frequently look for food on ground.



Fig. 10. A Marquesan Swiftlet, best identified by the location.

Iphis Monarch (*Pomarea iphis*)

Endemic to Ua Huka, where relatively common and widespread. It took me, however, two hours to locate the first one at the Botanical Garden. The right spot was a thicket along a right hand side stream (in relation to the main entrance path), behind a small pool of water between trees. A family with a single juvenile was holding territory there, despite persistent attempts of a domestic cat to kill the only surviving juvenile. In Hokatu, a female **Iphis Monarch** greeted me in a bush next to the bungalow in the second morning.



Fig. 11. A male **Iphis Monarch**, hiding in the shadows of a thicket.

Ultramarine Lorikeet (*Vini ultramarina*)

These pretty and rare parrots, locally known as *Pihiti*, are widespread in Ua Huka, the Botanical Garden being a particularly good place for observations. Vocal but shy, they proved to be surprisingly difficult to photograph (my 'over the hill' pocket Lumix also developed problems in the Marquesas). To my surprise, a few **Ultramarine Lorikeets** also frequented the trees of Hokatu village, being easy to observe from the heights of my bungalow. Get to Ua Huka and you will see it.



Fig. 12. An **Ultramarine Lorikeet** hides high in the canopy.



Fig. 13. Flowers, native or introduced, are everywhere in the Marquesas.

Seabirds

Locating a seabird observation site with good enough views was next to impossible in Nuku Hiva. All the roads skip the headlands and give close views only to sheltered, fjord-like bays. Far away off Taiohae one could see intensive, mostly unidentified seabird traffic.

The only place with some promise was in the dry 'desert corner' of the island, close to the airport. When leaving the airport, take the only right hand road to a secluded bay with small harbor and stop around half way, close to the start of the runway. In there, it is possible to park by the road and walk down to the cliffs. There are not that many seabirds around on this side of the island but the ones seen may be identified. On two visits, my best record was a lone **Phoenix Petrel**. It tends to be sunny on the dry corner but whenever rain occurs, everything gets sticky and muddy. On the first visit, I was caught by rain and had to drag a few kilos of mud on my trekking sandals up the hill, before reaching the car. Needless to mention, the rain stopped as soon as got to the road...



Fig. 14. The Hokatu seabird observation point, the massive Motu Hane dominating the scenery. The motu looks like a happily petrified giant...

Ua Huka was a completely different story. Already when landing, I could see thousands of **Sooty Terns** from the plane. At the Hokatu observation point, the first afternoon (15.00-17.45) produced over 2.000 **Audubon's Shearwaters** flying east, tens of thousands of **Sooty Terns**, thousands of

Black Noddies and dozens of **Grey Noddies**. Additionally, a few **Brown Noddies**, **Red-footed** and **Brown Boobies**, and **Great** and **Lesser Frigatebirds**. Petrels were completely missing, to my surprise.

In the next afternoon, a similar observation session produced only 600 **Audubon's Shearwaters** but there was more diversity towards the sunset: 9 **Kirimati Shearwaters**, 2 **Bulwer's Petrels** (together), and 2 dark morph **Herald Petrels** (= **Henderson Island Petrels**? - I am confused with taxonomy in regard to these). A party of 16 **Grey Noddies** was also a nice sight, and a personal maximum number for me. More time for seawatching would probably also have produced a **Polynesian Storm-Petrel**, but I had to leave, unfortunately.

AFTERTHOUGHTS

At the time of flight reservations, I was not aware of the problems (and expenses) airport transfers created in Nuku Hiva. Looking back, I would have been better off by staying only two nights in Nuku Hiva, spending at least three nights in Ua Huka and flying straight back to Papeete from Ua Huka, via the Nuku Hiva airport. Ua Huka was clearly my favorite place in French Polynesia. Please, do not miss the island if visiting the region.



Fig. 15. Aerial view of the relatively dry southeastern corner of Nuku Hiva.



Fig. 16. An erect *tiki*, sacred statue, at Taiohae beachfront.