

ROTA IN 24 HOURS – SOME ADVICE FOR TRAVELING BIRDERS

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In early June 2010, I had a chance to visit the island of Rota, Northern Marianas, for 24 hours between Freedom Air flights from Saipan to Rota and Rota to Guam. While regretting the all too short time on the pleasant island, I did my very best to see its three star bird species: the flightless **Guam Rail** (*Gallirallus owstoni*), **Mariana Crow** (*Corvus kubaryi*) and **Rota White-eye** (*Zosterops rotensis*).

These rarities are already endangered, the first two critically so, with about 50 rails, 200 (drastic recent decline) crows and about 1000 (1999 estimate after steep decline) white-eyes left in the wild, even though the introduced **Brown Tree-Snake** had not yet reached the island, at least not in large numbers. The snake has become a major potential threat to all islands of Micronesia, Marianas and Palau. The neighboring island of Guam, from where it all started, did lose most of its birds to the snake already decades ago. In Guam, **Guam Flycatcher** (*Myiagra freycineti*) and **Guam Kingfisher** (*Todiramphus cinnamomina*) were lost forever, and the local population of **Mariana Crows** soon followed together with many others. Even shorebirds and terns became scarce! The **Guam Rail** had to be rescued to captivity, with plans to introduction to other islands. In 1990's an experimental introduction was made in Rota, which has since had the only reproductive **Guam Rail** population in the wild. A reintroduction attempt was made also in Guam in an electric fence enclosure, but feral cats, another problem, finished the initially successful experiment.

As the remaining **Mariana Crows** also breed in Rota, together with the endemic **Rota White-eyes**, it is no wonder that the island has a special place in the hearts of globetrotting listers. Apparently on their way to extinction, but not without a struggle, these species deserve all the attention we are able to give them. Birding tourists, however self-serving their interests may be, help in conservation efforts by their mere presence and the dollars they bring to the island's depressed economy. When in Rota, please make it clear that you are not there to see the introduced **Black Drongos** but the indigenous birds and mammals. The Rota Tourist Map claims the widespread mainland Asian species being an endemic of Rota, together with the crow and white-eye, and fails to mention the **Guam Rail**.

Did I see all the three species? Yes, I did, against all odds and my realistic expectations of missing at least one out of three! The following short report will explain how it all happened and provide some up-to-date tips for fellow birdwatchers on their way to Rota.

PRACTICALITIES

In the Marianas, *Freedom Air* (<http://www.freedomairguam.com/>) is the most practical and least expensive way to move between the four main islands: Guam, Saipan, Tinian and Rota. Much like other small (and some large) Pacific Rim airlines, they do not yet have a fully functional Internet-based booking system, but their reservation will reply one's email requests (freedomair_res_guam@yahoo.com) and accept credit card authorizations. I could have bought my tickets in the Internet straight away, but their special stopover rate for Guam-Saipan-Rota-Guam triangle was only available like this. Their engine-propelled planes were old and no-frills but trustworthy, with experienced pilots. We were even served juice on the short hops between the islands. Bringing drinks on board was ok between Saipan and Rota, but not for Guam flights. It can be pretty hot indoors and it is a good idea to drink well before a flight.

In regard to car rental, I did my reservation with Islander Car Rental, a Philippine owned company with extensive network in this part of the Pacific, good new cars, comprehensive insurances and competitive rates (<http://islanderrentacar.com/>). Booking was more reliable than with Budget! They have an office at the Rota airport, appearing to be the main operator there. No problems with the rental, except for the fact that the closest gas station to the airport was located on the coastal road to Song Song, the sleepy capital, about 20 minutes drive away. Contrary to tourist map information, there is no gas available at Sinapalu Village, next to the airport. There are two gas stations on the island, the other one being in downtown Song Song. Driving was easy in Rota: light traffic and mostly good roads, including the gravel tracks.

The main practical problem one encounters in Rota is finding a place to sleep. There are hotels and guesthouses, but they tend to be next to impossible to contact. The accommodation scene is also rather volatile, for the moment. It is a constantly evolving scene of shifting ownerships, negligence and lack of communication, with surprisingly little interest in making money. Most of the establishments recommended by popular guidebooks, birding trip reports or Mariana Tourism Authority's homepages (www.mymarianas.com) had been closed, in cases for several years. For example, the guesthouse at Sinapalu Village, recommended by John Hornbuckle in early 2010, was closed the same spring. It may now have been reopened or closed for good. The rest have changed their email addresses and telephone numbers, and can therefore not be contacted.

Frustrated by my inability to get any response from the hotels, I emailed a local diving operator, Mark Michaels, who very generously came to my rescue. Even with his insider help, including personal visits to these establishments to see if they are actually functional, it took us several attempts to secure a room in Rota.



Fig. 1. The main road between the Rota airport and its capital, Song Song.

In the end, I stayed at the Rota Hotel, paying the 'local rate', USD 38.50, for a double room (hard beds, but otherwise ok), single occupancy, instead of the USD 150-180 'tourist rate' one may see in guidebooks and in the Internet. The difference in rates gives one some idea of the issues involved in room pricing. The new email address of the Rota Hotel (valid since May 2010) will not be given here, as the staff apparently has no access to it!

Good luck with your efforts! Hopefully a guesthouse with a working email address and/or telephone number will emerge. The other option is to just arrive in Rota and have a look around Song Song. At the moment, the rest of the island has only the Rota Hotel and Rota Resort & Country Club (very expensive).

Consequently, finding a meal other than snacks is also not as straightforward as on the neighboring islands. The airport has a café and there are a few options in Song Song, one hour away from the key birdwatching sites. I had a rather expensive but filling pizza in the capital, sharing the restaurant with a local police officer, the only other lunch-time customer. Half of the buildings in Song Song appeared empty and there were hardly anybody on the streets. There was, however, a well stocked small shop on the main street.



Fig. 2. My Islander Toyota Yaris at the Rota White-eye site, E Sabana Plateau.

THE BIRDS

People tend to spend several days in Rota to be sure to see all the three 'must' species. Many appear to employ a local guide, preferably somebody working in the monitoring and conservation projects, but nevertheless experience problems in obtaining satisfactory views of all three target species, especially the rail. I emailed a number of persons in Rota and the United States to ask for more specific directions for the **Guam Rail**, but there were no replies. That was rather frustrating, as I only needed to know the correct roads!

According to Internet information, the rails had been introduced in the 1990s in the Duge area (the majority) in the Northeast and at the Apanon Japanese Tomb (smaller number) in South Rota, but also above the seabird sanctuary (Saguagahga Point) in the Southeast and in a number of scattered locations on the West coast. Checking my maps and satellite images, I noticed that the main site, Duge, had several tracks around a village. I had but morning to look for the rail. It would therefore not be possible to visit all of them at the prime *Gallirallus* observation time, at dawn. One had to choose where to start from and that was not an easy choice without any local advice.

The **Mariana Crow**, on the other hand, had a few known stake outs, particularly around the Alaguan Bay Lookout. The species was, however, rather skulking, at least during the breeding season, and therefore nothing but guaranteed. With luck, however, it might be seen just about anywhere on the island. There were, after all, about 200 individuals left in the relatively small area. The Rota Tourist Map recommends Mochong Latte Stone Village, on the north coast, but birders have apparently only wasted time there. In

regard to **Rota White-Eye**, the map is more on the right track by suggesting Sabana Plateau. Some have visited a private nature trail there, but the landowner did not respond to my emails.

The publication of Frederick Amidon's breeding survey results in the Internet (<http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/theses/available/etd-12072000-091007/unrestricted/RotaBWEThesis.pdf>) had, however, significantly improved the situation. The highest densities of the species were clearly visible on the map, with the forest closest to the airport being among the best ones, with a public road passing right through the prime habitat. With just one road going up on the airport side and a 90 degree turn to right at the lower edge of the target forest, on a straight road, the site would be easy to locate.

The key to the following information is the Rota Tourist Map, readily available for free on arrival at the Rota airport. I did not dare to reproduce it in this report, but have included photos of another one. There are several maps in the Internet, not to mention Google Maps with its satellite images, which can be used as secondary source. I could not locate a downloadable mp3 recording of the **Guam Rail** in the net. There were, however, two mpgs with movie and sound. After some research, I used a freeware program to convert the better mpg to a mp3.

The chosen strategy was a simple one, being based on the scarcity of the species and their behavior: Wake up well before sunrise (4 AM), look for the rail at first light, then for the crow and then for the white-eye. As soon as the white-eye is seen, make another attempt with the rail and/or crow if they had not been located earlier on.



Fig. 3. Eastern Rota: The Y-crossing, the Guam Rail site and the Mariana Crow site are circled by red (site descriptions on the following pages).

Guam Rail

A predawn departure took me to the Rota Resort & Country Club crossing, car windows wide open. Soon after the crossroads, a calling **Guam Rail** surprised me at the first marshy bit by the road! This apparently is one of the more recent experimental relocation sites. The place was, however, not well suited for a viewing attempt and the bird did not respond to my recording, amplified by an external loudspeaker. Eventually, I decided to continue further on. Soon after a golf course and the resort, the tarmac turned to gravel and the road immediately became a rather narrow one. Finding my way to the next location was, however, straightforward.

Having read through all the available information, I had concluded that all **Guam Rail** relocation sites appeared to be grassy spots next to the sea. An examination of satellite images of the Duge area pointed my interest to an uninhabited stretch of road between the ruins of Mochong Latte Village and As Matmos Point. Could this be the grassy track mentioned in some trip reports? After some hesitation, I decided to focus on this road, spending the best part of early morning there, with frequent stops and playing of the mp3 file. This proved to be a mistake, as I neither heard nor saw anything reminiscent of a rail there, just the omnipresent **Black Drongos** and other common introductions, and a pair of **White-throated Ground-Doves** (more common up Sabana Plateau).

Disappointed, I drove towards the Duge Village, not sure what to do as the sun was already getting high. Should I go for the crows or try one more Duge site, and perhaps visit the Bird Sanctuary (Seabird colony) parking area later? Not completely happy with only having heard the rail, I decided to try once more. At a Y-junction (above word 'Quarry' in the Tourist Map, see also Fig. 3) I turned left, towards the Duge Village (not marked on the tourist map but well visible with Google Earth), but continuing straight east past the village, through a very promising habitat of scattered bushes and long grass. Looks so good, but...nothing! Perhaps it is too close to habitation? At the end of the straight section, I took a smaller track to an open meadow, played my recording once again and decided to turn back. No luck with this one! Damn! With my limited information, I could be in a totally wrong part of the Duge area, which covers the whole NE section of the island.

Disappointed but already starting to focus on the **Mariana Crow**, I began to drive the above-mentioned straight section back. What was that, standing on the road?! A large rail... A **Guam Rail**!! Stunned, I observed an excited male running in circles on the road, stopping to look around right in the middle of the track. A female appeared and suddenly the source of anxiety, too. A rival male **Guam Rail** ran across the road, right next to my car, and disappeared in the long grass. The couple started mating in the bright morning sun (6.55 AM), at the edge of the grass! After the copulation, the female disappeared in the grass, and the dominant male returned on the road, surveying its territory. Wide smile on my face and silently cheering, I took documentary photos through a dusty car front window, with my pocket camera. Four **Guam Rails** and three seen, in bright sunlight! Wow!!



Fig. 4. Male **Guam Rail** on the road next to Duge Village.

Mariana Crow

After the success with Guam Rail, I drove past the Airport entrance, still smiling and cheering, and located the southward Alaguan Bay Road in Sinapalu Village. Deciding to drive straight to the Lookout and perhaps half a kilometer beyond, in order to see the vantage points before stopping to look and listen for the crows (time was running, I wanted to start at the best site), I soon passed a Japanese WWII Command Center and a burial site (cf. Tourist Map). The lookout proved to be collection of benches on the left side of the track. The best area to see the forested ridge on the right (Sabana Plateau; to the west) was just before it. Consequently, I turned around, stopping by a local seaside farm house with plenty of introduced birds around and a view to the west.

Immediately after stepping out of the car, soft crow calls were heard in the forest next to the house! Soon a family of six **Mariana Crows** appeared, either flying between trees or soaring low over me. After satisfying their curiosity, some of the birds ascended, landing on trees high on the Sabana ridge, while others disappeared in the lower forest. It was 7.20 AM and I had already seen both of the difficult species! There was still 10 hours left to see the **Rota White-eye**, the supposedly the relatively easy to locate species. Quite happy with my success, I started the short journey up to the Sabana Plateau.

Rota White-eye

Locating the right road to Sabana Plateau was relatively easy, as a sign with 'Sabana' pointed to the right direction at the western edge of the Sinapalu Village. Leaving the main tarmac road to airport and Song Song, I turned left to a road construction area. The Sabana road, at least the lower part, is undergoing an upgrade which should apparently finish in 2011. It was readily passable with a 2x2, also higher up.



Fig. 5. Western Rota: The best site for **Rota White-eye** has been circled by red.



Fig. 6. The 90 degree bend is located right at the edge of the protected forest.

Again, I first drove all the way up to the end of the road, high up on the mostly cleared (for agriculture) plateau, partly to see the situation with the remaining forest. No easily accessible forest was seen after the conservation area gate (closed for night). The best stretch of road, both in terms of accessibility and **Rota White-eye** density (see Amadon's survey map), is located right before the gate. It starts in a sharp right hand uphill turn at a point where the open fields end (well past a small Japanese cannon; cf. Tourist Map) and continues for less than a kilometer to the gate. The right hand bend separates two relatively straight, long stretches of road and is easily visible on all Rota maps with the Sabana Road. There is natural forest on both sides of the road, even though the trees may at first appear rather low. During my visit, the best spot of this stretch was the first 90 degree bend, which eventually delivered the **Rota White-eye**. No buildings could be seen close to the bend, contrary to some former information. There may have been a farm house behind the long grass.

Seeing the white-eye was, however, not easy. Not easy at all. Soon after my arrival, I saw a single yellowish green passerine flying by. It had to be the white-eye, but could not be identified with certainty. For the next 4 hours, I went up and down, becoming increasingly desperate and bitten by a number of mosquitoes. Fantails, starlings, myzomelas and *orii* **Collared Kingfishers** (common but endemic for Rota), and another glimpse of a candidate white-eye, but nothing definite. A number of dark clouds and rain showers passed by, with increasingly strong winds, making me even more miserable. Would I actually miss the 'easy one' after such a phenomenal morning? At noon, I decided that enough is enough, and had a break. I went to the Seabird Colony (Bird Sanctuary) and later to Song Song, to have a lunch.



Fig. 7. One of the many roadside **Rota Collared Kingfishers** (*Todiramphus chloris orii*).

I returned at 3.35 PM, with improved wind conditions. Three hours and ten minutes left till I had to go to the airport, in order to not to miss the Freedom Air shuttle to Guam! It was the last flight of the day and I was supposed to fly to Chuuk early next morning, after a shortish sleep at Guam Days Inn. Adamantly, I started to check the roadside trees in the hot afternoon weather, up and down, up and down... Finally, two

white-eyes were seen at the low end of the stretch! Well, almost... The Toyota Yaris had an annoying function. One has to take its key off whenever the engine is stopped to avoid a loud alarm. Once again, the key got stuck and I lost the birds! Why could they not stop for more than seconds!? It was my very last stop at the right hand bend, just before giving up at 6.45 PM, when a group of three **Rota White-eyes** appeared in the same tree, one of them giving excellent views! Dehydrated, I filled my car up with gas and went to the airport, for celebratory cold drinks.

The Seabird Colony

The Saguagahga Point seabird colony ('Bird Sanctuary' on the Tourist Map) is located 15 minutes from the airport and signposted almost opposite the airport junction (thereafter, follow additional signs). At the end of the downhill gravel tracks a pleasant parking area/picnic spot leads to a well-organized observation post. The site provides extensive views across the Alaguan Bay (too far for the crows) and the close-by breeding seabirds. This would have been an excellent site for photography, particularly for flight photos of tropicbirds, noddies and terns (see the title photo, of a **White-tailed Tropicbird**). Anybody with a proper camera is bound to become rather trigger-happy by the cliffs. Great views of the sea, too and a cool breeze. Unfortunately, my pocket camera had great difficulties in focusing on moving white objects. My only **Mariana Fruit-Bat** (*Pteropus mariannus*) in the Marianas was seen flying over the seabird colony, at 1 PM.



Fig. 8. There were dozens of **Red-** and **White-tailed Tropicbirds** at the seabird colony.

I hope your visit is going to be as successful as mine, and at least twice as long!