



## SAIPAN & TINIAN, NORTHERN MARIANAS 2010 – SOME INFORMATION FOR GLOBETROTTING BIRDERS

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**Fig. 1.** A **Golden White-eye**, an endemic of Saipan.

On the 20<sup>th</sup> – 21<sup>st</sup> June 2010, I had a chance to visit Saipan and Tinian, the two main islands of the Commonwealth of Northern Marianas, a semi-independent region of the Western Pacific controlled by the U.S.A. The idea was to watch birds and to do it fast and efficiently. Just like other visitors before me, I was looking for the endemic bird species of the region. All the target bird species were located, with a

successfully planned effort. At the end of the day, there was also time to spend with the WWII relics of the islands, a former ground of one of the bloodiest battles between the United States and the Empire of Japan some 65 years ago.

The following notes will describe what I did and hopefully help other visiting birders to have an equally good result. Both Tinian and Saipan are relatively straightforward places in terms of services, access, distances and bird locating tactics. The main risk factor is the weather, which may in the worst scenario spoil everything on a short visit, not to mention create serious delays in flights between the islands. This probably does not happen often, but it may nevertheless be best to time one's visit before or after the height of rainy season. Among the main target species, **Mariana Megapode** is by far the most difficult one, but **Nightingale Reed Warbler** may also be tricky to spot when not actively singing, due to its skulking behavior.

Only selected bird species will be mentioned in the following report. I am going to focus on the most interesting ones. All the photos have been taken with a simple pocket camera, a Lumix with 10x zoom.

## **DAY 1 (20<sup>th</sup> June 2010)**

I arrived straight from Palau, with a stop in Yap and an early morning transit in Guam. There was only one hour available for the transit, including a slow (and somewhat ridiculous) security check in Guam, and I was happy that my Continental Micronesia flight had not delayed, but had arrived right on time. This is a positive feature of Pacific island hopper connections; they tend to be reliable.

The check in with Freedom Air (go to ground floor, not to the 2<sup>nd</sup>) was incredibly slow but when everything was over, things went smoothly. In the Northern Marianas, Freedom Air ([www.freedomair.guam.com/](http://www.freedomair.guam.com/)) is the most practical and economical way to move between the islands of Guam, Saipan, Tinian and Rota.

I could have bought my tickets straight away in the Internet, but their special stopover rate for Guam-Saipan-Rota-Guam triangle was only available by contacting them at [freedomair-res-guam@yahoo.com](mailto:freedomair-res-guam@yahoo.com). Their engine-propelled planes are old and no-frills but apparently well serviced and with experienced pilots. It can be pretty hot on board and it is a good idea to drink water before a flight. Freedom Air will also serve juice.



**Fig. 2.** Freedom Air Cherokee at Saipan runway, ready for takeoff.

On arrival at the Saipan International Airport, I was met by an Islander Rent-a-Car representative, at the small domestic terminal. Islander is a Philippine owned company with extensive network in this part of the Pacific, good new cars, comprehensive insurances and competitive rates ([www.islanderrentacar.com](http://www.islanderrentacar.com)). She took me to their office at the international terminal, a short walk/drive away and I got my Toyota Corolla.

Soon afterwards, she drove me back to the domestic building, after I had put my bags in the car trunk, parked safely in a gated area next to the office. A ticket to Tinian was bought (return USD 69.00) and off we went in 30 minutes, in a six-seater Piper Cherokee which commute across the strait between the islands every half an hour, with the exception of a lunch break. The hop is less than 15 minutes.



**Fig. 3.** The dry and flat terrain of Tinian can be observed from the plane.

At the Tinian airport we crossed the huge runways and parked next to the airport building (car rental available), being the only plane there at 10 AM. This is not the Enola Gay atomic bomb airfield; it is located in the north of the island (saw it on the way back).

I walked through the building in scorching heat (cloudless sky) and advanced across the lawns to the right, where a gravel track enters extensive bush and continues, probably for kilometers.

**Tinian Monarch**, the reason for my visit, proved to be unexpectedly difficult to find. It took a full hour to locate one. **Bridled White-eye**, on the other hand, was common (50+), just like **White-headed Kingfisher**, **Mariana Fruit Dove** and **White-throated Ground-Dove**. There was even a **Yellow Bittern** (common species) in the dry bush. On return, I had to wait for the flight but nevertheless returned to Saipan at 12.15.



**Fig. 4. Tinian Monarch, an endemic to the island.**



**Fig. 5. Crossing the straits back to Saipan.**

As planned, I spent the hottest afternoon hours by shopping for food and drinks, and by locating my hotel in Gorapan. Summer Holiday Hotel (<http://sholiday.com/mainopening.html>, [sholiday@pticom.com](mailto:sholiday@pticom.com), tel. 670-234-3182) is a great budget choice on a peaceful side street right next to the center of Gorapan. They charged USD 55.00 for a double room with a kitchen. After a quick shower and a meal, I started my afternoon birding at the well known 1 million gallon water tank (blue, huge), by driving first to the north along the coastal highway, then to the right after the closed down La Fiesta Shopping Center and then uphill to a Y-crossing and the tank.

I parked 100 meters to the right, by a singing **Nightingale Reed Warbler** (more massive than expected, parts of the song much like **Nightingale**). From there, I continued uphill to Mt. Petosukara, checking the roadsides on the way up and back.

Five more **Nightingale Reed Warblers** were discovered in the general area, all in full song despite the time of the day. The shy **White-throated Ground-Doves** and **Mariana Fruit Doves** were easy to observe in low fruiting trees. **Island Turtle Doves** and **White-throated Kingfishers** could be seen here and there between Gorapan and the northern end of the island. **Bridled White-eyes** were common but only 5 **Golden White-eyes** were noted. A lone **Guam Swiftlet** circled low over the road towards Petosukara.

What surprised me were the over 50 **Orange-cheeked Waxbills** (West African species) and a pair of **Red-browed Firetails** (Australian species) in the roadside grass between the tank and the Petosukara radar station gate. The species must be colonizing Saipan really fast. I have not seen them mentioned in earlier trip reports.

Having already seen all the Saipan endemics except one, I proceeded to the Bird Island Lookout. It was still a bit early for the **Mariana Megapode**. The Lookout is scenic point but with only the common terns, noddies and tropicbirds. Afterwards, I returned to the Banzai Cliff – Last Command Post area (Marpi Point), observing the Japanese and other pilgrims to these gruesome history sites, a scene of last battles and hundreds/thousands (depending on source) of suicides of mostly civilian Japanese, long jumps to rocks below.

One reference states that 10 000 civilians died on Saipan, either by U.S. fire or by suicide, following the imperial order to die rather than surrender. Numerous Japanese were also shut in their caves by U.S. explosives and still remain there.



**Fig. 6.** The Last Command Post of the Japanese forces, before their defeat.

At one point after a short but heavy shower of rain, I sneaked to the low forest behind Korean Peace Memorial (right corner, a kind of 'track'), hoping not to be noticed by the other tourists. It is a peace memorial, by the way, not the 'war memorial' mentioned in some reports. It was hot, the terrain was hard, the trees had equally hard branches and there were one or two biting insects. Not a pleasant place.

It took considerable time to locate a calling **Mariana Megapode**, briefly. I left with a double relief. No need to stay in this uncomfortable site any more, after a long day which started with an overnight flight from Palau (actually, all in all five flights)! Additionally, no need to go the Laderan Trail behind Mt. Petosukara at the break of dawn the next day!

It was time to drive back to Gorapan (about 15 minutes drive) and to discover a great deli with proper meals, tables and a take away bakery.

The deli is located relatively close to the Summer Holiday hotel. Go west to the main street (Beach Street, the old coastal road) and turn right. After a few blocks there is a shopping center on the left. Right before the center, there is a parking area (left). The deli can be seen in the back. If you are able to see the end of the street at a T-crossing in front of the American Memorial Park, make a u-turn because you have passed the right place. I checked a number a shops and bakeries while in Saipan and this was without a doubt the best.



**Fig. 7.** A **Bridled White-eye**, a common endemic of Northern Marianas.

Early to bed after a nice dinner and another much needed shower. Once again, all the Saipan species were seen in half a day. This seems a fairly reliable result for experienced birders who have done their homework before arrival, weather permitting. Saipan is a small island and the key sites are very close to one another, at the northern end of the island.



## DAY 2 (21<sup>st</sup> June 2010)

Up at 5.30 and out at 5.55. First back to the Korean Peace Memorial, for another look. No luck this time with the tricky megapode. Then to the Water Tank road and up to Mt. Petosukara. A few moments of contemplating at Suicide Cliffs and the Banzai Lookout. Fortunately, no bungee jumping at either site (you never know with tourism developers)...

The weather was rather hot and I returned to the hotel at 10.40 for a mid-day rest. At noon, the room had to be vacated and I did some shopping before returning to the north (Marpi Point) and spent some time at the Bird Island Lookout (the noddies had large chicks in their nests, almost able to fly). Saw a shark.

Another short visit at Banzai Cliffs (no shearwaters) was made before returning to Gorapan, where I had an early noodles and meatballs dinner at the deli, purchasing food for the next morning (no shops open at Rota on arrival), too.



**Fig. 8.** Banzai Cliff, the main lookout.

More or less the same birds were seen on the second day, with exception of the missing **Mariana Megapode**. **Island Turtle Doves** were also seen in Gorapan, with a total of 15 recorded. With more time available, I had great views of more than 10 **White-throated Ground Doves**, including a juvenile, and over 20 **Mariana Fruit Doves**, most of them at the Mt. Petosukara road. Four **Guam Swiftlets** were seen there and two at the Last Command Post. The Water Tank area had the singing **Nightingale Reed Warblers**, the same birds as on the previous day. The Last Command Post, with its many flowering trees, was very good for **Golden White-eyes**, with over 50 birds present. **Bridled White-eyes** were common throughout.



**Fig. 9. Mariana Megapode** habitat behind Korean Peace Memorial.

I drove early to the airport, stopping on the way and having a long chat with the young Filipino lady in charge of the car rental booth. Bought five bottles of drinks for the next day, too. It was ok to bring them on board the evening flight to Rota.



**Fig. 10.** A White-headed Kingfisher at Korean Peace Memorial.



**Fig. 11.** Good luck with your visit in Saipan and Tinian!