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BIRDING THE BISMARCKS SOLO: WEST NEW BRITAIN

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Fig. 1. West New Britain is not only about birds. There are plenty of other things to see in its forests.

The island of New Britain, the largest in the chain of New Guinea's Bismarck Islands, belongs to a specific category of bird tourism destinations. Much like the rest of New Guinea, it has more or less been reserved for groups of affluent individuals on guided package tours with a very expensive price tag.

The combination of exorbitant prices, lack of information and shortage of tourism services other than for groups has kept people away from the island, just like it has prevented the expansion and diversification of wildlife tourism in the rest of the nation, despite exceptional resources. The two categories of tourism could, however, well exist side by side, as they already do in a number of other peripheral destinations of international tourism.

On top of the service prices, the visitors arriving in PNG are currently robbed at currency exchange, when they change their cash to kinas, by a whopping 20+% (one fifth of your money!) commission. Do you math on rate differences. The streets of Port Moresby may be safer in this sense that its banks...Therefore, add 20% to the already expensive prices on the islands except for car rental (credit), because it is a cash economy.

(It does not help to do the exchange in Australia, where the commissions are even higher, with additional fees, quite possibly the highest in the world).

At the end of the day, there are not many tourists who travel to PNG. Many potential visitors are simply not able to afford the visit. Some who might be, may do comparisons with other destinations in Southwest Asia, where the cost of services is only one tenth of the expenses in PNG. Why should one not go to Bali instead, and have it easier, both in regard to stress and the wallet?

On the other side of the coin are, however, the birds and other wildlife which are unique, not to mention the scenery in places like New Britain, with its many volcanoes. There is a great attraction in the endemic species of the region, with so many beautiful birds restricted to this exclusive part of the world, and a chance for surprises in places only superficially studied for ornithology.

New Britain is also known to be significantly safer and with better infrastructure than the main island, with some space for relaxed enjoyment of nature. All the necessary services are there, for a price, and especially in the Western province of the island, the Kimbe region.

Visiting the island independently in July 2013, without previous experience, was nevertheless a daunting project. The comments of fellow birders who had successfully been there, like Jon Hornbuckle, did not exactly encourage the solo approach. It was therefore the more rewarding to successfully make it! I stayed in Kimbe for six days and seven nights, birding by myself, and scored with 103 species, including 30 species endemic to New Britain or to the wider Bismarck Islands region.

During the visit, July 10th to 17th, , the weather was fine with occasional short showers but predominantly sunny weather. In the afternoons, it was humid and between +27 and +33 C on the coast. At higher altitudes, the temperatures were two to three degrees lower. In the mornings, it could be relatively cool on the hills before the rising sun started to have its effect.

I encountered hardly any mosquitoes in New Britain, except one or two at the Mahonia Na Dari compound, by the seashore. No leaches on the forest tracks, either. The tracks and roads were relatively dry and in good condition, with a few exceptions in Tove Forest.



Fig. 2. Low tide shoreline at Mahonia Na Dari, Kimbe Bay and volcanoes in the horizon.

This hastily written report has been made to encourage and empower people to visit New Britain by themselves or in small, independent groups. There are affordable alternatives to group tours.

The information on practicalities took some effort to collect, and was eventually tested on the spot. My accommodation, car rental and self-arranged food cost around K710 per day, €228. It was very expensive, but not nearly as expensive as the full service option at Walindi Resort would have been (approximately €420 per day, extra drinks and snacks included). In my case, the first option could be afforded, the second could not.

The arrival of more do-it-yourself tourists would benefit also the current package bird tourism scene on the island, by creating more records, familiarity and general pr for birding in New Britain. Kimbe region could become even more established as a bird tourism destination. The price of traveling there guarantees that there is not risk of becoming unsustainably crowded.

Independent travel definitely is not a competitor of businesses such as the Walindi Resort, the choice service provider of bird tourist groups. The two segments of birdwatching tourists have different needs and preferences, with parallel existence. Many independent travelers could not afford staying in a full board resort, even though they might consider selectively using some of its services during their stay in New Britain.

FLIGHT CONNECTIONS

Port Moresby, the capital of New Guinea, is well connected with various international destinations in the Southwest Pacific region, and especially to Brisbane and Cairns in Queensland, Australia. There are daily flights with carriers such as Qantas, Qantaslink and Air Niugini.

On arrival, the immigration procedures are smooth and there is a transit counter for domestic flights right at the international arrivals. Local SIMs and phone time may be purchased for a few kinas (K20 for a SIM and 20 messages in July 2013) in the same hall. The visa on arrival fee currently is K100, around €33.

There are daily flights between Port Moresby and Hoskins, the airport of the West New Britain Province and Kimbe. The connection is run not only by Air Niugini and its jet-propelled Dash planes, but also by more affordable (and potentially less reliable?) options such as Airlines PNG. Air Niugini works best in connection with international flights, OneWorld alliance RTW tickets in particular, many of which are codeshare Qantas/Air Niugini.

The inward flight I had in July 2013 was by a rather worn-out Dash 100, but the return was in a brand new Dash 400. The first flight was delayed an hour but the second one was right on time, as most flights appeared to be during the week I spent in Kimbe. The planes could reliably be seen crossing the island on their way between Hoskins, Rabaul and Port Moresby.



Fig. 3. Air Niugini Dash 400 has landed at Hoskins Airport, the gateway of West New Britain.

Nevertheless, it may be a good idea to reserve an extra day or two for the return to Port Moresby and one's international departure, in case of a major delay. They have occurred.

I myself had three days in-between, in the best case (which happened) for three nights in Port Moresby (Granville Hotel, very basic but secure for K180/€58 single) and daily visits to Varirata National Park (the marsh at PAU junction has been destroyed by a 'wildlife amusement park' development). A surprising number of lifers were discovered on this second visit.

In the worst case, the time reserve would have enabled me to reach Port Moresby on time for a transit to Cairns and a scheduled night of luxury at its Aspect Central Motel.



Fig. 4. There are many great birds at Varirata National Park: A Rufous-bellied Kookaburra.

ACCOMMODATION

From the visitor's point of view, the accommodations of New Guinea are (sometimes ridiculously) overpriced. The rooms tend to be dirty and badly maintained, despite charges which typically are between 100 to 250 euros per night in Port Moresby, for example. Also in New Britain, the first look revealed nothing but over 150 euros per night lodgings.

What is more, the information on accommodations tends to be outdated and the businesses are difficult to contact. For example, the Hoskins Hotel is closed, just like the Queens Head in Walindi (despite vague plans to reopen it in the future), contrary to latest Lonely Planet information. All the hotels in Kimbe Town apparently belong to a category of two to three star facilities with eight star prices.

The most obvious choice, and a choice of class, excellent services and good communication with prospecting customers, the Walindi Resort, unfortunately also has rates which put off many interested customers (USD 200/K465 per day full board, with wifi and laundry service).

For a bird guide and transportation, one would need to add USD315-395/K733-919 per day, with inevitably somewhat limited hours. A full day with a guide can, after all, not be 16 hours in the field, as it may easily be when birding solo. All in all, the daily cost of full service package was around USD560/K1300 in summer 2013. In other words, €420 per day.

The all-inclusive package with a guide may be ideal for some, but as already argued, not all of the potential visitors.

My solution was Mahonia Na Dari (Guardian of the Sea, mahonianadari.org), an extensive compound of bungalows and other facilities, and Walindi Nature Centre, 17 or 18 km from Kimbe towards Talasea. Their Internet home page had plenty of information, including the contact email address and phone number. More information was received by emails. The organization is working for nature conservation but also has its business activities as a field research facility provider, with contracts with various universities.



Fig. 5. This is what Mahonia Na Dari is about...

Nathan Wakou (mnd_operation@global.net.pg), the head manager, replied my emails promptly and informatively. Ivan Enoch, the site manager, did an excellent job in organizing things during Nathan's leave, with the support of Cecilie Benjamin, the acting program director.

They have bungalows and rooms for scientists doing field research. These accommodations are oftentimes available for nature tourists. Visiting birders are therefore very welcome to stay there. The compound is attractive and secure, with 24 hour security and self-sufficient electricity between 6.30 AM and 11 PM.

My accommodation was in a two bedroom bungalow which could have accommodated five persons. It cost K181.50 per night (about €58). The bungalow had a bathroom with plenty of reliable hot water (hot showers!), and a large kitchen cum living room. There was a gas stove, spacious fridge and all the basic utensils of a kitchen, including plates, glasses, cooking pots, water boiler and cutlery.

I had planned to visit the Walindi Resort restaurant next door (250 m?), well known for its delicious food, but was so happy with my own cooking that I never had the need. The visiting scientists had left an ample reserve of canned surplus (I was told to dig in) and Kimbe K-Mart (the best supermarket in town) had even more, including fresh products and cold Bundaberg ginger beer! They also had a small bakery in the shop.



Fig. 6. My comfortable bungalow, right by the sea.

The house had three ceiling fans and a library to pass the evenings, if there was time after making the meals, washing clothes and writing down the daily records.

The other occupants of the lodging included a pretty unidentified mouse (information on New Britain mammals is difficult to obtain), which did not cause any damage during its nightly searches for food scraps. One may, however, need earplugs at night because one or two Bismarck Hawk Owls are always calling right outside. The species is abundant on the coast.

Mahonia Na Dari also has rooms with a common bathroom and kitchen for K90.75 per night per person. I did not check out how the rooms were but would trust that are quite adequate, as well.

Their courteous driver Martin will meet you at Hoskins Airport, and give the ride to and from your accommodation for K121 one way. Lifts between Kimbe and Walindi, the location of the Mahonia Na Dari compound, may be arranged on demand, for example in the connection of car rental return in Kimbe.

I paid everything in the first morning in cash, at the Mahonia Na Dari office building, also to get rid some of the cash I was forced to carry around in PNG. There is an ATM in Kimbe, but it may not be a good idea to rely on its services. If the machine happens to be out of order or short of cash, one may be left stranded.



Fig. 7. The kitchen is well equipped, and there are ceiling fans.



Fig. 8. The obscure highway entrance to Mahonia Na Dari. Notice the bushes with yellowish leaves. The gate is at the end of the access road.

CAR

Budget PNG has a franchise in Kimbe, right next to its harbor, opposite Kimbe Helipad. The price of a 4x4 was K255 per day + K1 for each kilometer, with K55 CDW per day (K2.500 deductible) and an additional 13% stamp duty and VAT. We estimated 100 km per day, but this was exceeded by 50 in the end. All in all, I paid around K480 (€149) per day for the car, including fuel. There was a K300 (€93) fuel deposit, which was returned at the end of the rental. Petrol and diesel were readily available in the centre of the small town, at two service stations.

Budget delivered the car at Mahonia Na Dari, spot on at the agreed time at 8.30 AM, and I returned the car at their office in Kimbe, the flight to Port Moresby being early in the next morning. Budget office hours were 8AM to 5PM on weekdays and 8AM to 2PM on Sundays.

The original delivery was a massive Nissan Navarra with a relatively low clearance and space for six, but this was soon replaced by a more agile Mitsubishi L200 Sportero, after I saw that they had it, too. I was happy with the Mitsubishi.



Fig. 9. Budget Kimbe services in a test; they passed with flying colors.

The Budget PNG headquarters in Port Moresby will do the reservation. There is one important detail to consider if the visit involves more than a single rental. I had also reserved a Mitsubishi Lancer for visiting Varirata National Park (yes, it was still possible to drive all the way in a sedan, with care and skill) and Budget therefore made only single pre-authorization for the deductible on my Visa account. The one for the Sportero was extended for the Lancer, thereby avoiding double blockage on the account. According to Budget PNG, it takes about three weeks to release their pre-authorizations.

A 4x4 is a necessity in Kimbe, as the main birding locations can only be accessed by driving through the Numundo Palm Oil, with its rough plantation roads. On the first day, I drove to the Davialu Bridge, unaware that the bumpy access had loosened the vehicle's battery cables, thereby causing a complete blackout at the time of an attempted start, after an hour's stay on the bridge. Fortunately, I knew exactly where I was and had bought a local SIM with credit. A sms to Budget office was sent and 30 minutes later their team arrived to fix the problem. Later on, I had no trouble with the car.

The slow gravel tracks mean that it is best to wake up around 4 AM and hit the road half-an-hour later, if one desires to arrive at the forest sites at dawn. For example, the driving time between Mahonia Na Dari and Garu WMA is around one hour, give or take 10 minutes, if one knows the

way. With a local guide, 45 to 60 minutes is adequate (available also at Mahonia Na Dari, in case one tolerates non-birder company when birding).

On the other hand, the coastal road between Kimbe and Talasea, via Mahonia Na Dari, provides a unique treat for PNG motorists. The surface has recently been renewed by New Britain Palm Oil Limited (their trucks also break the roads), the tarmac being perfect, and it was actually possible to drive over 100 km/h on a deserted stretch of road! No such luxury on the main island of PNG... I astonished a few locals by telling about the speed in Port Moresby. Between Kimbe and Hoskins, the road is slow and potholed. According to Lonely Planet, this used to be 'the best road in PNG'. There are no official speed limits in New Britain.



Fig. 10. The coastal highway, with perfect tarmac and another oil palm plantation.

HUMAN INTERFERENCE

The local people may become a problem in destinations where visitors are scarce and therefore an interesting sight, especially if understanding of tourism and birdwatching remains vague. In South Africa, I once tried to explain that tourism is not a job, I am not paid to do it and no, there is no school where one may study to become a licensed tourist on a never-ending journey, with a high salary and all expenses paid. I wish there was such a school.

The local norms and customs may also sometimes be difficult to comprehend, especially when a person originates from a nation where there is free access to any land and visit a nation where permission is needed to enter privately owned areas.

In West New Britain, the situation varied a lot. The majority of the people were polite, welcoming and helpful, but some friction also occurred with a few representatives of the more general public. Overall, the issue of 'host-guest interaction' does worry people planning to visit PNG and a short description of my experiences in West New Britain will therefore be given here.

Within the Mahonia Na Dari compound, I could go anywhere I wished to go. On the public roads, such as the coastal road between Kimbe, Walindi and Talasea, there were no restrictions. In palm oil plantations (Numundo, Davialu) and Numundo Beet farm I could drive any track and was left in peace. The police and military saw me a few times in Kimbe, but showed no interest in stopping a tourist. In NBPOL (Numundo plantation and cattle farm), Kimbe town, Tove and Tili Forest, Garu WMA and Mahonia Na Dari compound I was treated with respect. In other locations there was a mixed response with a majority of well-behaved people but also a minority of interfering individuals.

Around Talasea, a few blokes arrived to silently stare me at a close distance, creating an uncomfortable situation. A number of locals seemed to have an assumption that a foreigner's arrival on their island meant that he was there to entertain them, instead of the other activities he might have had in his mind. Along the coastal highway, many people expressed curiosity, even fright (women) of the strange person on their turf.

Some of them had an agenda to extract money, the children being the most outspoken: "White man! Good money!" It was therefore essential to stop only away from people or, if not possible, not to step the one step off the public road, on private land (entrance fees may apply!).

Many also expected to get a lift in a spacious car occupied by only one person. They clearly did not realize that a birder is not commuting between settlements and has rented a car with an insurance which is void if hitch-hikers are picked in, not to mention the potential consequences of an accident involving local passengers.

On Davialu Bridge, a few motorists stopped their cars right in front of me, blocking the view and engulfing me in diesel fumes and the roar of engine, to ask if everything was fine. Well, everything was, before they arrived... Some also blew their ear-shattering horns to say hello.... In Tili Forest, another friendly hello-sayer stopped his tractor in front of me just when I was about to take a photo. Therefore, no photo of Black-tailed Monarch in this report... Somehow these situations tend to happen the very moment one has spotted something interesting, after a long search for it!

The most annoying thing was the odd total disrespect of private property, e.g. one's car. A person could come to your car and attempt to scratch his name on the paint, as happened in Talasea! The manager of the Budget told that they had switched to white cars because of this. Similarly, all

roadside signs need to be encased to prevent vandalism. Fortunately, one's car is safe in the Mahonia Na Dari compound, unlike in Kimbe, for example.

The issue of private land access was not really a problem for me. With a single exception, I was able to avoid any legitimate claims of trespassing during the six days of birding. In Garu Forest there was a polite argument over entrance payment (more below). At Kilu Ridge, one of the village boys demanded a road toll (more below), telling that "This is my road!", but his parents soon corrected the situation.

All in all, there were people who interfered with birding, but only occasionally, and always after the best birdwatching time, the early morning hours. I never felt threatened in West New Britain.



Fig. 11. The Garu WMA information sign; notice the visitor fee of K20.

KIMBE BIRDING SITES

The basics of birdwatching in the region are available in the Internet and in literature, for example at the Walindi Resort home page. There is, however, no detailed information on the access to Kimbe birding sites. It therefore took me some time to guessimate the locations of each of the sites, with the help of anecdotal Internet clues and satellite images (Google Earth/Maps). All of them except Tove Forest were eventually correctly located. It is not a very large area and the number of both roads and remaining natural forests is limited.

At home, I drew some useful sketch maps for field use, primarily to understand the grid-like road system of the huge Numundo palm oil plantation and the complicated crossings on the way to Mosa Forest.

In the following descriptions, some route guidelines are provided, based on July 2013 situation. Ultimately one needs to take a look at Google Earth/Maps satellite images and maps, and make one's own plans, to be adjusted to the current road conditions in the field. In a grid, there are a number of alternative routes from point A to point B in case some sections are under repair and therefore closed to traffic.

I am not going to list every species for each site but rather focus on the most interesting species. In addition to the ones mentioned, the following species were widespread and commonly seen in West New Britain: Brahminy Kite, White-bellied Sea-Eagle, Osprey, *tristrami* Collared Kingfisher, Sacred Kingfisher, Coconut (Rainbow) Lorikeet, Rainbow Bee-eater, Moustached Tree-Swift, Glossy Swiftlet, Uniform Swiftlet, White-rumped Swiftlet, Pacific Swallow, Varied Triller, White-bellied Cuckoo-Shrike, Olive-backed Sunbird, Willie Wagtail, Metallic Starling and Singing Starling.

Mahonia Na Dari compound

In the first morning, before my car was delivered, two hours were spent birding the Mahonia Na Dari grounds, a collection of two dozen buildings in park-like surroundings by the sea. As already mentioned, Bismarck Boobooks were always present and highly vocal there at night. Once, I managed to see one near the bungalow. In addition, a surprising variety of other endemics were observed.

Golden Masked Owls occur in the area, with a dead bird recently collected close to Walindi Resort, but my limited searches only revealed Nankeen Night Herons (sometimes almost owl-like when flying in car headlights). Having a record of the owl's call would probably greatly improve one's chances of locating it.

Red-knobbed Imperial Pigeons were common, just like anywhere on the island. In one occasion, a Knob-billed Fruit-Dove spent an afternoon on top of a tall tree right next to the bungalow. In the same spot, a female Stephan's Fruit Dove was encountered in the first morning. A few Blue-eyed Cockatoos were always present, together with the ubiquitous Eclectus Parrots, a few Buff-faced Pygmy-Parrots and dozens or hundreds of Red-flanked Lorikeets.

New Britain Friarbirds are resident, especially around the entrance check point area. Most of my Ashy Myzomela records in West New Britain were made in the Mahonia Na Dari gardens, which also had a few Black Sunbirds. Two Long-tailed Mynas visited the place once, being apparently scarce on the coast (abundant on the hills), like Red-banded Flowerpeckers, which were nevertheless more frequently recorded in Walindi. Bismarck Crows were ubiquitous.



Fig. 12. Bismarck Crows had strikingly blue eyes, not whitish as portrayed in *Birds of Melanesia*.



Fig. 13. Eclectus Parrots are ubiquitous in the region; a male bird.

Davialu Bridge

At Kulu River, south of the Numundo Plantation (NBPOL), a bridge crosses the waterway on the way to Davialu Plantation and the densely populated hills of Tove Forest. In maps and satellite images, the meandering large river is easily spotted west of Kimbe town, together with Numundo Plantation to the north of it and Davialu Plantation in the south.

It is a narrow one lane steel bridge with frequent traffic of lorries carrying people to work and Kimbe, and the occasional heavy machinery. It is nevertheless possible to look for birds at each end, and on a walkway, which runs separate of the car lane and is protected by steel railings. At the north end of the bridge, there is enough space to put up a scope and sit on bridge structures, for long periods of scanning.



Fig. 14. A view from the Davialu Bridge observation point.

I did not go down to the open gravel bed at the river, a location preferred by groups, partly because I chose to guard my car, just in case somebody might be interested to break in. The gravel bed would be a more peaceful spot with better visibility, but also more difficult angle of observations for canopy and fly-by birds. Beware of the crocs, if you go there!

Even though the surrounding areas are largely cleared for palm oil production, there is a narrow belt of natural forest along the river, which forms an area attractive to a variety of birds. To the west, there is the remnant Tili Forest.

Viewing conditions are good because of the open character of place, the birds crossing the river, spending time in canopy and flying over the plantations. Afternoons, even the hottest hours, proved to be more productive than late mornings, just like concluded in Walindi Resort birdwatching information. I never, however, went there at dawn. There may be plenty of commuting soon after sunrise?



Fig. 15. A Red-knobbed Imperial Pigeon, together with Metallic Starlings.



Fig. 16. A pair of Pacific Black Ducks.

The common species included Little Pied Cormorant (1 resident), Black Bittern, Pacific Black Duck (up to 3), Blyth's Hornbill, Eclectus Parrot, Blue-eyed Cockatoo, Purple-bellied Lory (commonly seen at most sites), Red-flanked Lorikeet (many), Buff-faced Pygmy Parrot, Shining Bronze Cuckoo, New Britain Friarbird and Shining Flycatcher.

The star bird of the site is the elusive Bismarck Kingfisher. I saw the species only once, on four visits, and consider this to be my best record in Kimbe. As the dead car battery forced me to stay at the bridge longer than planned, for an extra 40 minutes, I returned to the observation point despite light rain. The rain ended and there it was! A Bismarck Kingfisher, an individual with creamy white underside, had arrived when I was trying to start the car. It stood on a driftwood at the mouth of a small side stream of the main river, on the left on the east side of the bridge. The bird stayed there for 25 minutes but was never seen again. There were other kingfishers at the bridge, too, including a Common Kingfisher.

Another very good species, an unexpected one, was an adult Bismarck Goshawk which crossed the river and disappeared to the direction of Tili Forest, being easily identified by its robust size, pale plumage and bright red lores, cere and legs. The bird reappeared at the site on another visit, too! Up to three Variable Goshawks, a smaller species with a wider range, were present on each visit, one of them particularly fond of stalking prey on a large tree close to the bridge observation point.

With Bismarck Sparrowhawk at Garu WMA and Meyer's Goshawk at Kilu Ridge (see below), I only missed the very rare Slaty-mantled Goshawk (also recorded in Kimbe) out of the royal flush of *accipiters* in New Britain!

Pale-vented Bush-hens live in the riverside scrub by the bridge, skulking in the vegetation. Both Violaceous and White-necked Coucals were present, the latter much easier to see. A Black Imperial Pigeon joined the ubiquitous Red-Knobbed Imperial Pigeons once, and a few Yellowish Imperial Pigeons were also seen. A pair of Song Parrots was recorded only once, just like a pair of Bismarck Hanging Parrots, a Red-chinned Lorikeet (they occur at lower hills (at fruiting season?) but are scarce, unlike the abundant Red-flanked Lorikeets) and a lone Long-tailed Cuckoo.

The *heinrothi* Cicadabird, also observed at the site, is an interesting case in the light of the current revision of Pacific cicadabirds. The almost similar *remota* Cicadabird of the neighboring New Ireland is nowadays classified as Grey-capped Cicadabird. My only Bismarck White-eyes, a party of three, were recorded at Davialu Bridge, at a surprisingly low altitude for the species. It apparently occurs at low altitudes on other islands, but not normally in New Britain(?).

The access to the Davialu Bridge is relatively simple. From Kimbe, turn left to the Numundo Plantation road after 6.5 km, or from Walindi, turn right after Numundo Beef (about 11 km), and continue till a T-crossing (large machinery shed on the right). Turn left and immediately right. Continue till the second crossroads (about 2 km) and turn left. After two to four crossroads, turn right and to the left at the next crossing. If in doubt, follow the most worn out track. There is plenty of traffic to Davialu Plantation seasonally adopting the best available route to the bridge.



Fig. 17. Swimming in Kulu River may not be a good idea, even though it is hot and humid. Well, the resident crocodiles might argue otherwise... Pukpuk = crocodile in pidgin.



Fig. 18. Variable Goshawks are regularly seen at Davialu Bridge. This bird had a favorite vantage point in a tall tree.

Numundo Oil Palm Plantation (NBPOL = New Britain Palm Oil Limited)

The channels and muddy ponds of the 'green desert' of the palm oil plantation held a small number of bird species. Nankeen Night-Herons were occasionally spotted, being regular on the coastal tarmac road before sunrise, apparently hunting rodents and amphibians there. One or two Black Bitterns were seen each day, and Stephan's Emerald Doves were best seen in the shade of oil palms. My only two records of Forest Kingfisher, a scarce visitor, were also made in and around the plantation. If the conditions are particularly wet, even wildfowl may be spotted in shallow ponds under the palms.



Fig. 19. One of the key points for orientation: the NBPOL Numundo access road junction.



Fig. 20. On each day, a Black Bittern or two were recorded at Numundo plantation.

Garu WMA (Wildlife Management Area)

It is a long drive through the NBPOL grid to Garu WMA, each east-west section of the grid being about one kilometer long and north-south sections a few hundred meters long. The route I adopted was as follows: Drive in along the main access road. Turn right at the T-junction, with a machinery shed on the right. Pass the two sheds/buildings on the right and a side track on the left, go left in the next three-way crossroads. Continue past one side track on the right, to a T-crossing (gate and building across the road), and go left. Turn right after second crossing.

Continue till the fifth crossing and turn again right. Go forward till reaching a worker's compound on the right (6th crossing). Turn left immediately after the compound (7th crossing). Turn right at the first crossing and continue till the edge of the plantation, turning right at a T, the 8th crossing, and start climbing the Garu Road uphill. The entrance is signposted.

Not sure if it was ok to bird the Garu track all the way through, even though I mistakenly supposed it to be a public road, I proceeded with caution and made it sure to stay on the track, with no trespassing in the forest. On the first visit, the people on the road just greeted me, without any further interest. There were only ten other vehicles on the track during the six hour visit.

On the second visit, I ended in an argument with an elderly village representative, who tried to explain that even for the road, without ever leaving it to enter the forest, one is supposed to pay for the visit. We discussed and argued, and in the end he said it was ok for me to stay, if I stayed on the road. He did, however, not appear to be completely satisfied. When they left, the younger men on the truck kept on telling me that I should have paid to enter the WMA.

Baffled, I was not 100% sure what to think about the situation, mainly because some people had earlier tried to ask for road tolls in situations where they clearly had no right to do so, on the coastal highway, for example. I had, after all, an official permit to be there, my PNG visa!

Only after the argument, I stopped to read all the lines in the sign at the entrance to the forest. I had passed it before sunrise on both visits. Yes, it clearly stated that not even the people of neighboring villages had permission to enter the area and the visitors were required to pay K20 for each visit! There was, however, no information in regard to where and to whom the payment was supposed to be made.

Being about to leave the next day, I gave the K40 (two visits) to Ivan Enoch at Mahonia Na Dari and he promised to deliver the money to the right people at Garu WMA. I was not, after all, trying to avoid legitimate fees and had other birders also in my mind.

Future visitors should do the same, even though the K20 is a bit steep. For example, the entrance fee of Varirata National Park, close to Port Moresby, is K5, including access to trails and facilities.

With the Walindi Resort, the Garu WMA already has a long-standing arrangement. There could be another one with Mahonia Na Dari, a venture apparently widely respected and trusted in the area. I had told the elderly gentleman where I stayed.

The Garu Forest definitely is high on the list of Kimbe's birdwatching sites. Most of the common forest species of New Britain may be seen in good numbers there. White-necked and Violaceous Coucals were very vocal in Garu, more so than at other sites, together with the grey *macrocerus* Brush Cuckoos and Slender-billed Cuckoo-Doves.

The several hundreds of Red-flanked Lorikeets which feasted on fruiting trees were joined by a few Red-chinned Lorikeets. I suspect that the abundance of fruit attracts higher altitude birds there in season. The handsome Long-tailed Mynas were numerous and Spangled Drongos were encountered three times.

The star species include Bismarck Sparrowhawk. On the first visit, an adult almost touched my windscreen when flying low across the road, over the bonnet, and landing in the open only five meters from me, on a low branch of a stunted roadside tree! The bird was admired for some time but it left just when I was about to take the bird photograph of the year!

Other birds of prey included several Pacific Bazas. No Black Honey Buzzards, however, despite persistent search in fine weather. Others have, however, frequently seen them there. I had to wait till Tili Forest to score with this endemic. A few days later, I also saw the sister species, Long-tailed Honey Buzzard, at Varirata National Park, in addition to Doria's Hawk and Gurney's Eagle. The trip proved to be particularly good for birds of prey.

Once, a male Bismarck Hanging Parrot could be identified at Garu WMA. Respectively, only one pair of Song Parrots was seen there. The species appears to be relatively scarce. The wide-ranging Buff-faced Pygmy Parrots were more common.

A single heavy-set Black Imperial Pigeon was seen flying low along the track; an impressive sight of this predominantly black species. A few others probably called in the forest, but could not be definitely identified. I hope somebody will make a recording and share it at Xeno Canto, the premier site for bird sound recordings.

Parties of Yellowish Imperial Pigeons were frequently seen in fruiting trees by the road and one or two Finch's Imperial Pigeons were also seen and/or heard on both visits. A pair of Pied Cuckoo-Doves was observed towards the Garu end of the forest on both visits, and a White-bibbed Fruit Dove at the Numundo part of the track, in addition to a few Red-knobbed Fruit Doves.



Fig. 21. A party of Yellowish Imperial Pigeons at Garu WMA.

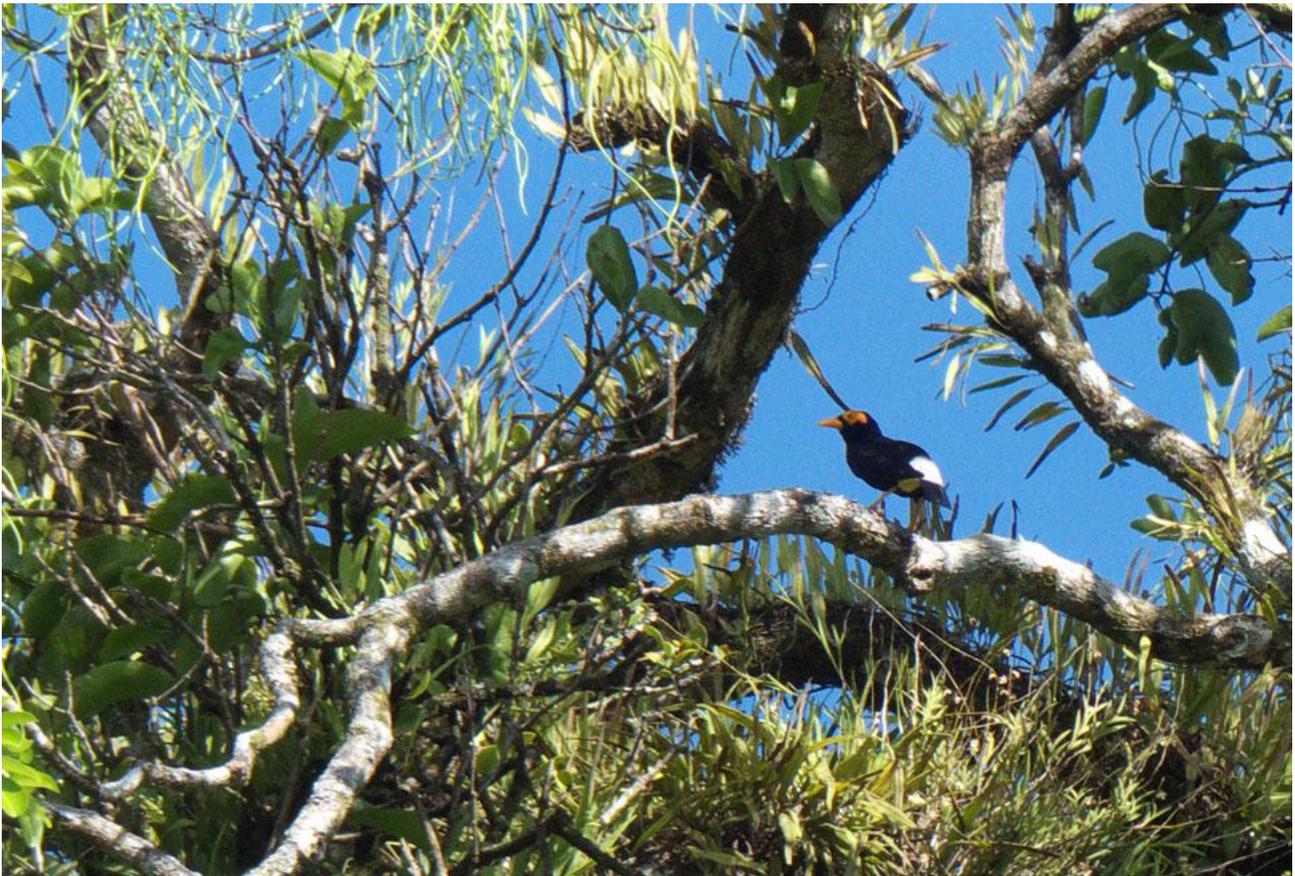


Fig. 22. Long-tailed Mynas were particularly common in Garu WMA. The species is not only colorful but also highly vocal.

Another very good find was the *eichhorni* Velvet Flycatcher, a male of which was seen crossing the track on the first visit. My only Black-bellied Myzomela was also recorded at Garu WMA (beware of the numerous Black Sunbirds). Red-banded Flowerpeckers were common in roadside vines.

Surprisingly, also a pair of Spotted Whistling-Ducks was seen flying high over the ridge, somewhat unexpected in the forest! Let's hope they have found a sanctuary for breeding there.

Melanesian Scrub-fowl, for which the WMA has primarily been established, are abundant, but very difficult to observe from the road, even though some of them called right next to it, just like two *gazellae* Red-bellied Pittas and two White-breasted Quail-Doves. The geothermal breeding grounds are sensitive and require a guide.

Even more difficult to spot were the Black-capped Paradise Kingfishers; present everywhere if judged by their calls. I never saw a single bird in Garu. On the first visit, neither did I spot any White-mantled Kingfishers, which were however easily seen on the second trip, with a few calling high in the canopy.



Fig. 23. The Garu road: it did not get worse than this. Contrary to expectations, there was no damage by logging trucks. Logging has ceased some time ago.



Fig. 24. The handsome White-backed Kingfishers prefer tall canopy, from where they actively call in the mornings.

Tove Forest

This forest with a number of former logging tracks can apparently be reached by crossing the Davialu Bridge and continuing to Davialu Plantation (buildings on the left). By the plantation, one should proceed forward. In July 2013 the small bridge was broken, however.

Instead, I turned left at the end of the plantation compound and continued until the next parallel road in the grid, turning right there. After 7 to 10 crossings (not more), one may turn again right to reach the original forward track (turn left).

Going forward, the edge of low hills was soon reached, with a few options to proceed. A morning's exploration on these tracks, however, revealed no good habitat. The area was mostly cleared for numerous gardens and houses. The numbers of birds I saw there were also distinctively low, in comparison with the other sites, and I failed to find anything new. With my limited time, I therefore decided to leave the Tove Forest in peace.

On the other hand, I learned the full capacity of Mitsubishi's low 4x4 gear, to the joy of the local observers. It was amazing how well it climbed or descended in deep mud. One of the tracks would probably have led to the current edge of the forest, as there was plenty of it close by, but I failed to find the correct way to proceed.

As a conclusion, I probably was exploring an area which used to be good few years ago but not anymore. I should have asked for up-to-date information on spot or at Mahonia Na Dari, but failed to do so.

Judging by the records made by package bird tourists the area has great potential, including Bismarck Kingfishers, and should probably continue be on the list of visiting independents, with better preparation than mine.

Tili Forest

The site is a relatively intact even though small patch of lowland forest in the immediate vicinity of Numundo Plantation and Davialu Bridge; to the east of the latter, north of Kulu River and south of NBPOL access road.

There are two main options for access: 1. Turn left about half way on the NBPOL access road and continue till a T-junction, turning right. The forest will soon be discovered on this road, or 2) drive about one km towards Kimbe after the NBPOL crossing, turn right, and continue on this track till the forest starts, after the T-junction mentioned under the first option.

Once again, birding was done along a plantation road, which had remarkably little traffic, excluding Sunday, when several people walked along it on their way to fishing and relaxing at the Kulu River, carrying bottles of alcohol with them. I would probably do the same, if I was colonized by Malaysian investors and their huge palm oil industry, and had been working hard at the plantation for six days in a week.

I went to Tili Forest only twice, first to make a reconnaissance visit in the heat of an afternoon and second, at dawn on Sunday morning. More visits would have been desirable, time permitting.

The site had much the same species as Davialu Bridge, excluding the birds of the river. Slender-billed and Bar-tailed Cuckoo-Doves were particularly visible there, together with roadside Stephan's Emerald Doves. Black-capped Paradise Kingfishers were commonly heard, but again, very difficult to see, unlike White-mantled Kingfishers, which were especially easy at Tili Forest. I saw the first species only once in six days.

My only Black Honey Buzzard was observed all too briefly, being flushed from a canopy of a roadside tree. Finsch's Imperial Pigeon, White-bibbed Fruit Dove and White-breasted Ground Dove were also recorded once.

Among the more widespread species, my only Barred Cuckooshrikes and Northern Fantails (*finschii*) were seen at Tili Forest. A roadside Ashy Myzomela showed exceedingly well during the second visit, just like some Blyth's Hornbills. And, finally, I scored with a lively party of Black-tailed Monarchs, missed at all the other sites. A pair of Shining Flycatchers showed a lot of interest in me at the same spot, staying at a close distance for fifteen minutes.



Fig. 25. The Tili Forest plantation road.



Fig. 26. An angular head reveals the identity of a male Shining Flycatcher.



Fig. 27. There was a lot to see at Tili Forest; a red dragonfly.

Numundo Beef Grassland

This is an obvious grassy opening towards Kimbe, as one leaves Walindi, between the Waraston Oil Mill and NBPOL access road. I first noticed the site because of several Buff-bellied Mannikins, most reliable there, and the long, untouched grass. First, after leaving Mahonia Na Dari, there is the municipality landfill, then the Waraston Oil Mill (the duck ponds were dry) and finally the natural grassland on the right, between the highway and the Numumdo Beef cattle yard at the base of the hills. In this region, hundreds of cattle are periodically herded across the road.

Through the center of the grassland runs a gravel farm road. First, it meets a grassy mound on the right, a favorite den of *sumbae* Clamorous Reed Warblers, a potential split. Guy Dutson (Birds of Melanesia; what a great field guide and a source of daydreams!) places the bird under Australian Reed Warbler, but Peter Kennerley and David Pearson (Reed and Bush Warblers), together with IOC, have adopted a different standpoint. The debate on Asian *Acrocephalus* taxonomy is likely to go on.

Then, there is a marshy area on the left, before the cattle pens. Papuan Grassbirds are there, because several pairs breed in the grass, and may easily be heard and observed. I drove in and parked my car next to the mounds, scanning the area from there, and walked along the track. On the track itself, Pale-vented Bush-hens, King Quails and especially Buff-banded Rails were seen scurrying around in the late afternoons, together with their chicks.

An unidentified brown rail, most likely the last species, was also observed. Pink-legged Rail occurs and could be seen, with luck, in the Kimbe region, but is not likely in grassland habitats. It is supposed to be a forest edge species.

The large opening also provided great views of the general area, especially during evening commuting flights, when the birds on their way 'home' met the giant Bismarck Flying Foxes on their way 'to work'. Brahminy Kites were particularly numerous and I also saw a pair of Island Imperial Pigeons and a lone Finsch's Imperial Pigeon, in addition to dozens of Red-knobbed Imperial Pigeons. For some reason, not a single Yellowish Imperial Pigeon. Bismarck Crows, common along the coast, are also common at Numundo Beef. A few Blyth's Hornbills were recorded, as well.

Other species seen (only) at this site included Yellow-Bittern (once), Australian Swampheaven (once), Pacific Black Ducks (a few records, up to 4), three Tree Martins (each visit) and a lone Red-rumped Swallow (each visit). The first and last two apparently are rare visitors to New Britain. Eastern Cattle Egrets, on the other hand, seem to have established themselves at Numundo Beef, with six and one birds noticed on two occasions, just like Tree Sparrows have recently colonized the harbor area in Kimbe. Be sure to score this New Britain tick at the helipad when returning your rental car!



Fig. 28. The Numundo Beef grassland: an entrance track and a grassy mound (on the right).



Fig. 29. Papuan Grassbirds thrive in the grass. The species is a rare treat for a globetrotting birder.



Fig. 30. A single Australian Swamphen was spotted in the grass.

Kilu Ridge

The access road may be spotted in satellite images. North of Patanga (Google Maps), there is a ribbon of houses following an inland crest of a ridge, with an uphill track.

On the way to Talasea, one enters the Kilu Ridge area at a one-lane bridge (Rilu) with potholes after it, requiring decrease of speed. Soon afterwards, there is a village school by the road (Patanga). The road veers to the right, right by the sea and there is plenty of space to park on the left. At the next bend to the right, one enters a spot from where the best views of the sea and a large lagoon can be had; my regular stop on the road.

In the next uphill curve, one turns sharp left. A concrete track leaves the road uphill on the left, in the shade of oil palms, just before some simple village fruit stands by the highway. Large native trees can be seen towering high above the palms and other trees. The track will go steep uphill along the ridge, with a number of houses right next to it, on both sides. I was welcomed to drive up by the men of the village.

One of the boys in the village, Joaquin, however followed me up to the viewpoint, initially not disturbing observation but eventually initiating a conversation which led to demands of a road toll for driving on 'his road'. As the adult villagers had welcomed me to drive up, I did not agree but left, as other children also started to appear, too, yelling and running after me. Down in the village, they were quickly silenced by their parents, with whom I had a discussion.

The road up to the ridge is currently overgrown with grass and in need of repairs. A village elder, who had moved there from Sepik, told me that the regional government had given them some funds to maintain the track, but the investment had not met the actual needs, and very little had been done.

It is not necessarily safe to go further than to the top of the first climb, through the village and up to a grassy viewpoint, where there is space to turn around. Further on, it is not always possible to see the track in the long grass. This makes slipping off road and down the slope a real possibility. A high clearance car is a necessity because of the grass.

The site may be a bit difficult to bird because of the inevitable human attention, but is nevertheless interesting. During the short stay at the viewpoint, for example a pair of Bismarck Hanging Parrots was observed in a nearby tree, and a pair of Red-chinned Lorikeets also gave excellent close views.

The lower part of the ridge, partly visible from the highway, was equally productive. At the Kilu Ridge entrance, a huge tree attracted large numbers of imperial pigeons and other birds to a roost. In the last morning, 130 Yellowish Imperial Pigeons and four Island Imperial Pigeons left the tree.

A territorial Rusty Thicketbird was found singing close by, just as expected after reading the Internet information. I did not hear the song at other sites, even though the habitat appeared suitable for the species, for example towards the end of the Garu road, and the species is supposed to breed there. Perhaps the singing season was over, with only odd birds vocal?



Fig. 31. The Kilu Ridge viewpoint, downhill: and island and the sea in horizon and good views into the canopy. Raptors love to soar over the spot. Beyond this point, tall grass covered everything.

An unidentified, strange pigeon call left me wondering at Kilu Ridge: Could that have been the Yellow-legged Pigeon, which has sometimes been recorded there? There are no references in the Internet. Unfortunately, it was not possible to get close enough to see the bird. The exceedingly attractive pigeon would a real dream bird, and there appear to be no reliable stake-outs.

Several sessions of scanning the long ridge by a scope from the coastal highway eventually revealed a lone White-backed Wood-Swallow, high up on top of a dead tree. That was my only record of the species. A Violaceous Coucal, the more difficult of the two endemic coucals to see, was located in another tree while doing this, together with a Blyth's Hornbill.

Another great find for the site was a lone Meyer's Goshawk, an immature bird, with prolonged (15 minutes) soaring and gliding views of this sought-after *Accipiter*. One or two Variable Goshawks were also present at Kilu Ridge, together with other more common species of raptors, including Pacific Bazas. Ospreys were particularly common there, and around Garua Island.



Fig. 32. A view to the sea and to a large lagoon, 200 meters before the Kilu Ridge turnoff.

Talasea

If one continues on the highway past Walindi, first for 20 kilometers on tarmac and then a couple kilometers on gravel, one arrives in Talasea, characterized by the odor of sulphur, emitting from a number of steaming volcanic springs. The West New Britain horizon being dotted by inactive volcanoes, one gets a sense of being in the potential epicenter of seismic activity.

Just before my arrival, I received a sms from Finland informing about a 7.2 magnitude earthquake, followed by another of 6.8 magnitude, next to the neighboring New Ireland, deep under the sea.

From Talasea, it is possible to scan the sea and the Garua Island by scope. Restorff Island and other small islets show reasonably well and the aerial traffic between the islands may include some nice species.

Two shortish visits (evening light conditions are better) produced both Island Imperial Pigeons and a lone Nicobar Pigeon, instead of the target species Beach Kingfisher, which is also likely to occur on the coast there. The observations were mostly done from the public road by a small lonely shop, right before a police station on the right.



Fig. 33. My main Talasea viewpoint: Garua Island on the left, Restorff on the right.

In regard to the sea, there were periods of activity with terns and noddies, in addition to the ubiquitous Swift Terns, but for most of the time not much happened over the shallow waters. Among the species close enough for scope identification were Bridled, Roseate and Black-naped Terns, and Brown Noddies. Once, a large party of the first species moved along the coast.

One's chances to spot a Heinroth's Shearwater or a Beck's Petrel apparently are slim at Kimbe Bay. One afternoon had rather strong easterly winds and consequently more activity, but a proper storm would have been needed to bring the deep sea species close enough to the shore. Well, if time permits it, seawatching is always worth a try...

The Kimbe Bay pelagic trips, organized by Walindi Resort, may be too expensive for most solo travelers but might be an option for a small group, in connection with visiting one of the islands (Restorff) to see the small island specialists: Nicobar Pigeon, Beach Kingfisher, Island Monarch, Sclater's Myzomela and Bismarck Black Myzomela.

The Walindi Resort tours currently cost USD 945 for one to six persons to the Kimbe Bay islands, and an additional USD 305 for a pelagic extension, sensibly selected on spot according to weather conditions. In other words, going to the islands would cost approximately K2200/€706 and the pelagic extension K710/€228.

The low tide coastal mudflats between Walindi and Talasea had a number of Great Egrets and the odd Pacific Reef Egret, a Striated Heron and a *variegatus* Whimbrel. In season, there should be more variety of migratory shorebirds.

Other options

I had originally planned to visit Mosa Forest, too, 9 km km towards Hoskins from Kimbe and to the right after a large bridge, with another right at Mosa village (at km 8.5) and a network of farm roads (complicated, see satellite images and explore), but decided to skip the place. The visit became less attractive after I had already seen Meyer's Goshawk at Kilu Ridge. The species occurs at Mosa.

What is more, visiting Mosa would have included additional rental costs, not to mention the petrol. As mentioned, in PNG one pays for the driven kilometers, K1 for each of them, and K80 for Mosa. Finally, the site is well populated and is probably best visited with a local who is better able to explain the situation to the residents.

Such companion would have been readily available at Mahonia Na Dari, even though I decided to go solo all the way. A non-birder companion is a problem for birdwatching, however good and helpful company that person might otherwise be.

For the same reasons, I also skipped the sites close to Hoskins, notably Pokili WMA. To me, it is an uncomfortable place to visit because of the compulsory local guide, and there is not necessarily anything one could not see close to Kimbe, except perhaps a rather slim chance for a New Britain Bronzewing.

Visiting Pokili from Walindi costs K150+ as rental kilometers, plus petrol and an entrance fee (a total of at least K200). Much of the day is spent in the car, on bumpy roads.

It would have been interesting to explore more, particularly in regard to higher elevations, the haunts of four missed highland endemics (Bismarck Melidictes/Honeyeater, Bismarck Fantail, Bismarck Thicketbird and New Britain Thrush), but the time and funds did not allow this.

There is, however, plenty of space for new discoveries also at the locations described in this report. As an example, my records do not include five breeding species occurring there: Slaty-mantled Sparrowhawk, Golden Masked Owl, Pink-legged (New Britain) Rail, Yellow-legged Pigeon and New Britain Bronzewing. All of them have only seldom been recorded in West New Britain, even though they are resident there and could be seen by visitors, with skill and luck.

CONCLUSIONS

As mentioned in the beginning, this trip report was made to encourage others to visit West New Britain, too. Contrary to common expectations, it is not a problem to go there solo, and the expense of doing it is not quite as prohibitive as the reputation.

The key is to find a place such as Mahonia Na Dari to stay. Everything else can then be arranged for an independent tour in the region. If a guy from Finland is able to do it, visiting New Britain should be a piece of cake for independent birding travelers from Australia, for example. It is a neighborhood destination for Ozzies, after all.

The endemic species are stunning and make the island a very desirable option, even though several of them currently are out of reach because there is no easy access to high altitude forest. I loved every moment of it, also on the main island afterwards, but discovered my fatigue on arrival in Cairns. After two hours of waiting for a taxi, I finally got a ride to the comforts of a motel room.



Fig. 34. Television news at Aspect Central Motel, after a long deprivation, having successfully completed a second solo PNG visit.

(Unfortunately, the Ozzies are more interested in Iraq than Europe, excluding gossiping around some residents of the UK, the rather insipid relatives of the current ruler of the colony, Queen of Australia Elisabeth II. No, Australia is not independent yet).