



BIRD TOURISM REPORTS 7/2013

TIMOR-LESTE IN JULY 2013

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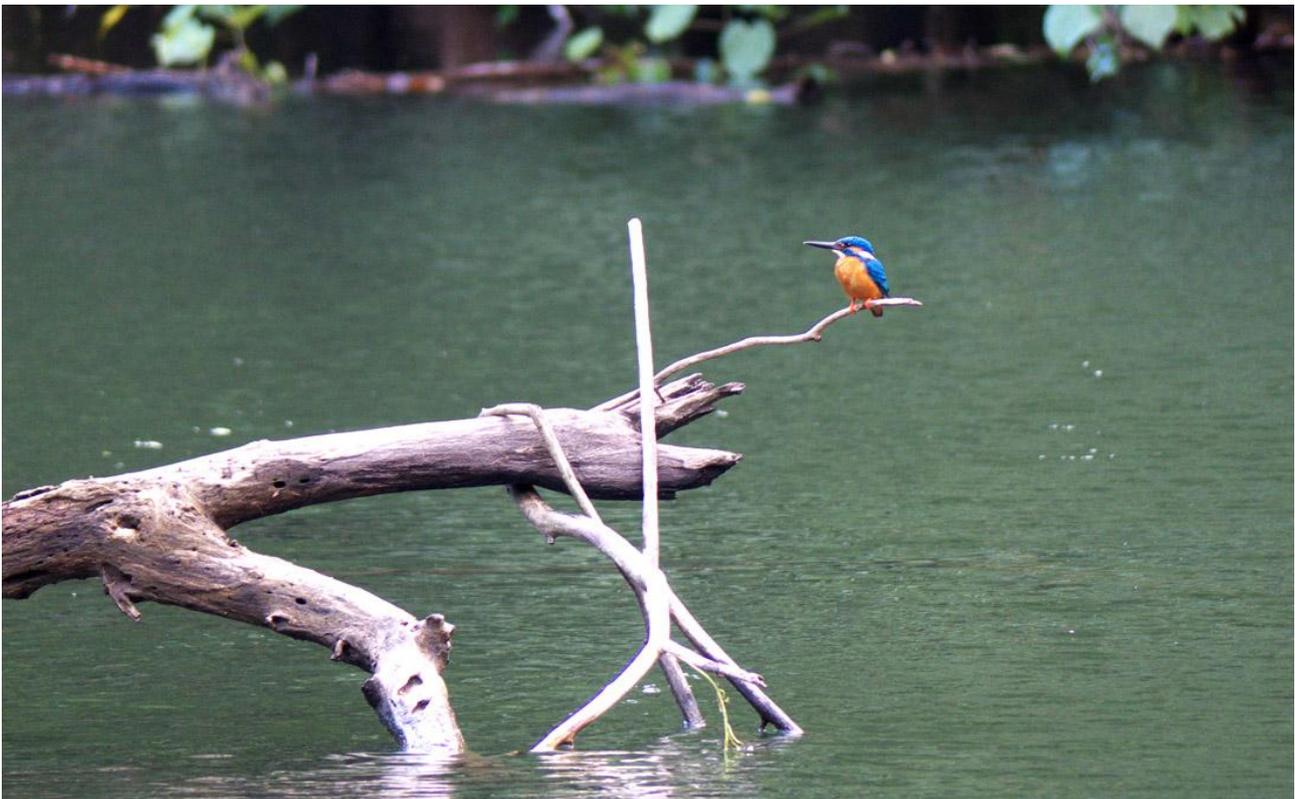


Fig. 1. Common Kingfisher at Malahara River, Lautem district.

Very few globetrotting birders have ever visited Timor-Leste for birdwatching. Neither have they reported their experiences in the Internet. On the island of Timor, it is the eastern part which has more potential for birdwatching, with two species not present in the west and more surviving natural habitats for birds. On either side, the shortage of infrastructure and services however limits nature-based tourism. The island also suffers from a lingering image of insecurity, after the East Timorese independence struggle and more recent ethnic unrest there, even though Timor has been quite safe recently.

The following report, based on experiences on a six day visit between 1st and 6th July, 2013, is an attempt to correct the situation. There unfortunately are not many photos. Rainy weather and busy schedule limited photography to the minimum. I even forgot to take any photos of accommodations, preferring to hit the bed instead, as early as possible! The views are my personal impressions on the road, sometimes emotional. Another visit by another person may well produce a set of different results and conclusions.

Even though one is not likely to meet desperately poor people in Timor-Leste, it is good to realize that it is a developing nation on the 158th place in the UN Human Development Index; below Bangladesh, for example. One fifth of the population is unemployed, almost half is illiterate and 53% lives on less than USD 1.25 per day. In the independence war of 1999, 200.000 were killed, 260.000 fled to the west (210.000 returned later), and the Indonesians destroyed 70% of nation's economic infrastructure. Timor-Leste became formally independent in 2002. In 2006, there was another ethnic conflict, an internal one, requiring the arrival of UN peacekeepers.

Many of the problems encountered on the road in Timor-Leste are partly explained by its recent history and the consequent socioeconomic problems. The role of Western nations in the independency process has fortunately a predominantly positive one. Even Portugal, the early colonizer, appears currently be seen in a rather positive light in Timor-Leste, as also witnessed by the people's preference to Portuguese language instead of English, as far as officially naming their country Timor-Leste instead of East Timor, the both names having exactly the same meaning. The Portuguese were rather inefficient in their management of the colony, thereby giving plenty of space for local decision making and maintaining a reasonable reputation.

Overall, the visit was a success, despite its exploratory nature. Much of the positive outcome may be credited to information generously provided by Colin Trainor, the leading expert of birdlife in Timor-Leste. Dealing with the practicalities of tourism on the island becomes much easier if one knows somebody who actually lives there. I can also recommend the field guide *As Aves de Timor-Leste (The Birds of Timor-Leste)* by Colin, Brian Coates and David Bishop, available at Internet book sellers.

At the end of the week, my Timor-Leste list included 115 species, each mentioned in this report. That is approximately half of the species recorded in the nation, without migratory birds which were absent in July, with few exceptions. Out of them, 41 species were endemic to Lesser Sundas, in most cases to the island of Timor and one or two of its smaller neighbors.

My only real miss was Buff-banded Thicket-warbler, possibly heard in Lautem, at a site where it should not occur. Wetar Ground Dove and Timor Bush Warbler I had already given up before arrival, the first missing a stake-out and the second being located too far from the rest of the target species.

Timor is not good for mammals. The Long-tailed Macaques one occasionally sees in forests and cages are introduced. My only other mammals, excluding domestic ones, were a few bats at the Los Palos savanna. Pot-bellied Pig probably is the most characteristic mammal for the eastern half of the island! I suppose they are less common in the west...



Fig. 2. Wildlife along Muapitine Track, Pot-bellied Pigs.

TRAVEL ARRANGEMENTS

Flight connections

Timor being an island, the main feasible way to go there is by air. In this regard, there currently are three options: 1. Silk Air/Air Timor flights from Singapore, the most expensive choice, twice a week, 2. Indonesian airlines such as Merpati Nusantara and Sriwijaya fly in from Denpasar, and offer the most economical but also most unreliable option (delays and cancellations apply; neither of them meet international security standards, and are therefore banned from EU skies), and 3. AirNorth flights from Darwin, Australia, the most reliable mid-priced connection (AUD 681 return in March 2013).

Personally, I was on an OneWorld round-the-world birding journey, which went from Sabah to Darwin and further on to PNG and New Britain in the Bismarck Islands. With Darwin on the route, the AirNorth connection became the most attractive option. On the 1st of July, I took two Malaysian Airlines flights from Kota Kinabalu to Kuala Lumpur to Singapore; short flights with even shorter transits which worked like a clock and took me on time to a JetStar flight from Singapore's Changi to Darwin, with a 'wee hours' arrival.

After clearing the Australian customs, to whom I declared all my food stuff honestly and in detail, therefore undergoing a half-an-hour check up before being declared harmless, I transited to the 6.30 AM AirNorth flight to Dili, the capital of Timor-Leste. My Finnish knife passed the customs once again, being undeniably a utility knife with a single blade, despite its size. One needs a sturdy knife to peel pineapples and to cut trees, if needed. With four flights in rapid succession under my belt, I was happy to have made it on time. With my high anxiety levels, I had not even felt tired yet.

AirNorth was rather strict with their luggage limits, weighing all the bags and charging for the odd extra kilos (they allow 20 kg for checked and 9 kg for hand luggage), but for some reason they let my bags through without checking them. There was nothing edible at the Darwin departures area, only potato chips and British style cold pies and sandwiches, but fortunately they had ice tea.

At the Nicolau Lobato International Airport in Dili, the immigration formalities were smooth. There was no need for currency exchange, because I had plenty of cash US dollars with me. US dollar is the official currency of the young nation, even though there also are local coins in circulation. I got a 30 day visa for free, and was warmly welcomed to visit Timor-Leste.

The first bird on the island was a Sooty-headed Bulbul, before having my passport stamped, and it was soon followed by Australian Pratincoles. I had arrived in Wallacea, with a mixture of Asian and Australo-Papuan species. On departure, Scaly-breasted Munia was added to my Timor-Leste list as its last species, a party of hundred birds feeding on airport lawns right in front of our departure gate.

(The return to Darwin included another half-an-hour session with customs, during which the same food items which had passed a week earlier, canned rations for PNG, were first confiscated and then returned, after a discussion on regulations. Afterwards, I had to stand two hours in a line to pick my Apollo car at Hertz counter, together with 40 other irate customers. The car was supposed to have a full tank but it was only 4/5. The almost three hour delay stunted my search for Yellow-rumped Mannikins and Letter-winged Kites, two of the four species I still miss in Northern Territory.)



Fig. 3. Dili airport departure hall, with duty free shops.

Car rental

Fortunately, things were more organized at Nicolau Lobato. In there, a representative of Rentlo Car Hire (info@rentlocarhire.com; www.rentlocarhire.com) was waiting at the arrivals. There are two main options for car hire in Timor-Leste: Rentlo and eSilva (www.esilvacarrental.com).

We went to the close-by Rentlo office, located in the former Timor Lodge compound, closed for good after the UN peacekeepers left in 2012, the Black December for many hotels and guesthouses in Dili. The 'newer' Toyota RAV4 I had reserved for the visit was waiting there, otherwise in good shape with minor dents and scratches, but with almost bald tires, already potentially lethal in rainy conditions. I complained about the tires, anticipating the future, but nevertheless accepted the car, being eager to start the long drive to Los Palos, in the eastern end of the island.

The car cost USD 620 for six days, with USD 90 for insurance. There was an USD 100 reserve for petrol, which was later returned. I was happy with the RAV4, even though the locals said that they claimed that something more substantial was needed for country roads.

This was not quite true. With some experience also wet and muddy sections (up to 300 m) could be negotiated with the high clearance and relatively light weight of the RAV4. Only in Ossu, I lost traction once, after a night's rain, in a steep spot which had deteriorated because some trucks had got stuck there on the previous day. Even there, a handbrake and careful handling produced enough grip to take the car up to the crest.



Fig. 4. An 'easy' rough spot on the Muapitine track. (No time for photos at the bad ones...)

Overall, the roads of Timor-Leste have apparently not been repaired since the Indonesians left in 1999. Some sections of the north coast 'highway' therefore have some surface in their holes, and not the opposite, especially around Old Baucau, the epicenter of dips and holes. The quality of the roads improved a lot some distance after the town. In there, it was possible to momentarily reach 60 to 70 km/h instead of the regular 20 to 50 km/h.

In Baucau, I made a move to avoid a nasty pothole via a reasonable-looking one. The chosen one had, however, something hidden in it! The left front tire got a serious hit which permanently damaged its structure, producing an impressive bulge. Instead of changing the tire, I drove with it till the end of the visit, making sure to not to hit anything with it again, and managed to take the car back to Dili. The Rentlo inspector did not criticize the damage, knowing well that the front tires already were at the end of their working life and ripe to be disposed anyway.

Otherwise, there were no problems with the car. The tank was filled with 95 octane petrol twice in Dili and twice in New Baucau junction (USD 1.66 per liter, less in Dili), and that was all I needed to drive the route Dili – Baucau – Los Palos – Muapitine – Los Palos – Muapitine – Baucau – Ossu – Baucau – Dili through. There was no need to buy diesel at the more informal rural 'filling stations' (petrol in bottles), the plan B.

The traffic was slow and congested in Dili and surprisingly heavy also on the coastal highway to Baucau. It was difficult to stop for birds on the first half of the drive. Around Los Palos and on the road between Baucau and Lautem junction, everything was more easygoing, not to mention the track to Muapitine, where only few other cars were encountered, most them parked by the track.

The East Timorese were not aggressive drivers in general, less so than I myself. It is, however, not necessarily a good idea to drive at night. There are no fences and animals are freely walking and running across the roads. One is responsible if anything happens to them, and there are many chicken, pot-bellied pigs, dogs, water buffalos and cows in the villages, not to mention children and other people.

In practice, it is not always possible to avoid driving after or before sunset. I did the first on the day of arrival, when the long transit from Dili to Los Palos took more time than anticipated, mostly because of lack of road signs (got lost in Dili and Baucau). I was also pretty tired, having had no chance to sleep the previous night. In both towns, it is best to ask the locals for directions, for example at petrol stations of Dili. It is also a good idea to draw oneself a road map or two for the trip, based on Google Maps satellite images and maps. The printed ones lack in detail.

The leg from Lautem to Los Palos was driven in darkness. Lautem is both the name of a coastal village where the road to Los Palos forks inland, and the name of the easternmost district of Timor-Leste. Later on, I started my drives from Los Palos to Muapitine an hour before sunrise on each visit, meeting a Savanna Nightjar twice, soon after leaving the town. It was important to arrive in the forest by Malahara River early and the 15 to 30 km/h speed on the rough road diminished chances of collision with humans or animals.

Accommodations

Securing accommodation probably is number one obstacle to be solved when visiting Timor-Leste. For my trip, I needed to get a room in Los Palos for three nights, in Loihuno (south of Ossa) for another two and in Dili for the night before departure. In the first two locations, the choice was simple. There are but one comfortable option for each of them: Hotel Roberto Carlos in Los Palos and Hotel Wailakurini in Loihuno. In Dili, there are plenty of establishments and the choice is not as straightforward. In the end, six hotels were contacted by email in the capital. Only one of them bothered to reply; the Sands Motel.

Astonishingly, even after the UN peacekeepers left and the business slumped, the hotels have little interest in being available for international customers. It is about lax attitudes and lack of basic infrastructure. For example Hotels Roberto Carlos and Wailakurini may have their Internet homepages and Facebook presence, but the contact information is outdated. In practice, they cannot be contacted from Europe. There are phone numbers and email address, but none of them worked. Well, not in the expected way... One of numbers was connected to a surprised lady living in Dili. Regular mail does not exist in Timor-Leste, either, with the exception of courier mail and a limited number of P.O. Box services in the capital.

Only with the help of Colin Trainor and his friends, it was possible to find out that both Roberto Carlos and Wailakurini were still functional. When I arrived in Los Palos, I was the only customer at the hotel. At Hotel Wailakurini, however, I was lucky to get a room, because of a group of motorbiking tourists from Australia and some NGO people already stayed there, not to mention a birder couple from Victoria, who arrived late in the evening (see Steve Clark's report on their trip at bird-aus.org). It was a full house for the two nights!

In Dili, everything went well with the Sands Motel, once it was located. During the search, I once asked a taxi driver where the place was, but he could not help me, despite the fact that we were standing right behind the building. The entrance to the motel was a bit hidden along the busy main street, Avenida dos Mártires de Pátria.

The double room at Roberto Carlos cost USD 45 per night and was ok with hot water, even though the bed was slightly shaky. The person responsible for cleaning the room kept on doing excellent work, earning a tip. In the first night, I parked my car under a coconut tree, missing the danger in the darkness. Fortunately, none of the nuts had fallen down at night. The room rate has recently risen from USD 35.

The room at Hotel Wailakurini had more problems, being noisy (kitchen right behind it, glassless windows on both sides) and with a number of holes (15?) in its mosquito screens, which should have been replaced some time ago, and a toilet which did not work properly. It took some time to seal all the holes with pieces of paper. The cost was USD 40 per night, and USD 7 for the buffet dinner. The rates have apparently remained the same since the place was opened.

At Hotel Wailakurini, the man in charge was not quite up to his tasks (more details below), even though he appeared to do his best. His female colleagues, on the other hand, were occasionally openly contemptuous towards the foreign customers. Overall, there was a major difference between the mentality of the people of Lautem district and the people of Baucau–Viqueque road.

In the latter, it was next to impossible to stop without being harassed, sometimes insulted and ridiculed, or, according to Colin Trainor, even stoned. Children ran behind the car and some adults made rude remarks, in addition to an occasional shouted 'TARDE!!' or 'Mister, Mister, MISTERR!!!' As a rule, the greeting was only a prelude for other things, with a self-serving agenda. (A few nice people were also met). In Lautem, I was always treated with respect and hospitality, as visitors should be treated as long as they do not do any harm to the locals. When the locals said their 'tarde', which they did a lot, it was a proper greeting, a short version of 'boa tarde', good afternoon in Portuguese. I replied with equal courtesy.

It would be interesting to know, how and why the people of Viqueque have developed such a rude and condescending attitude towards visitors in the first place, and how they think this agrees with the idea of having tourism in Timor-Leste. Already during the Portuguese days, a revolt in Viqueque was put down with the eager help of their neighbors, who did not get on with them... It was a fortune that almost all the species except three could be seen in Lautem, instead of the less hospitable Viqueque!

At Sands Motel, the room was cramped and a bit worn out and dirty, contrary to Lonely Planet information ('rooms bright and clean'), but nevertheless functional. The staff was very nice and professional. Ear plugs became handy, as the motel was along the busiest thoroughfare of Dili, with plenty of traffic noise, and there was a large ventilation window with just bars and a mosquito net. I covered the window as well as I could, to reduce the noise. The cost was USD 45 per night, breakfast (room service) included. The rate was USD 5 less than it used to be. They also had secure parking in the premises.



Fig. 5. Another disturbance in Ossu; an attempt to 'guard' my RAV4.

Provisions

Shopping for food may not be easy in a developing nation where the majority of the people get their meals from the fields, gardens and the sea. Sometimes, there is also 'bush meat'. At Muapitine, a group of children were each carrying a two to three kilo piece of python, freshly butchered in the bush. Must have been a magnificent snake...



Fig. 6. A Malahara farmstead: fertile soil and an abundance of growth.

In Timor-Leste, I had no problems in this regard. Some snacks were imported from Finland (e.g. Mad Croc 'energy croc choc' drink for the long drive after a sleepless night) and Australia. Shopping was done in two locations: at Leader Supermarket in Dili (close to airport and Rentlo), and at Nagarjo Supermarket in the New Baucau junction, a place with 24 hour service and a petrol station. Additionally, a simple breakfast, included in the room rate, was had at Roberto Carlos Hotel once, and a dinner buffet twice at Hotel Wailakurini. The food was delicious and plentiful in the latter place.

For visiting the Leader Supermarket in Dili, Colin did advice me to park the RAV4 at E. Silva's car rental, across the road. The parking area of the supermarket has a few shady characters selling SIMs, and there is a chance of a break-in. At Rentlo, they insisted that nothing could happen during the day, unlike at night, when streets of Dili are not safe for parking. In order to save time, I took the risk and parked in front, with my luggage visibly left inside the vehicle, and bought enough provisions for five days.

There was a good selection at the Leader, especially in regard to snacks and drinks, including Raspberry Vodka Cruisers from New Zealand (terrible stuff!), reserved for celebrating major lifers. The prices were quite reasonable and I left with a heavy load, including 15 liters of drinks, more than enough of food, candy and snacks, toilet paper, tooth paste and shampoo, having paid USD 53 for everything.

BIRDING SITES

As implied, I did my birdwatching along the north coast road, east of Los Palos (Muapitine, Malahara) and in Ossu (Mundo Perdido). Here are the details of the sites:

Lake Iralalaro

The largest lake in Timor was about ten times of its dry season size in July 2013, as a result of an extended rainy season. The lake was observed from the Muapitine road from Los Palos, on the way to Malahara River Trail and back. The access track starts at the eastern edge of Los Palos (check Google Maps), crosses an open savanna and follows the southern shore of Lake Iralalaro, towards Nino Konis Santana National Park and Tutuala. There are three roadside villages along it, the last one before Malahara River being Muapitine. In fact, the road runs straight through them and one should reduce the already slow speed when arriving at the settlements.



Fig. 7. On Muapitine track, returning to the village. Notice the line of trees by a stream (cf. the text). The Muapitine village starts just behind them.

A European stranger in vaguely military style gear may attract attention in this part of the world. None of the locals did, however, question me, ask for a ride or interfered with my travel in any negative way.

On the second visit a local boy raced with me from the first village to Los Palos. Across the large section of savanna, there is the hard track for cars and a soft parallel one for bicycles and motorbikes (possibly also for cars, I did not test it but played safe). The boy managed to maintain equal speed, losing ground on uphill climbs but catching downhill and in rough places. In the end, I let the proud boy win just when we entered the town. Some of the worst mudholes are right there, and require measured, steady navigation at snail speed.

On the way in and out, Spotted Kestrels, Brown Goshawks and Dollarbirds were located in roadside trees. Rock Pigeons and Spotted Doves lived in the villages. The best record was, however, a stunning pair of Bar-necked Cuckoo-Doves. Once, a pair of Brown Quail crossed the track. Few Red Junglefowl occupied the forested sections and were seen at dawn. They were shy and appeared at least feral.

The best site for waterbird observations was a shallow bay just before Muapitine village, dry flat grasslands in Google Maps satellite images but covered by deep water at the time of the visit. There were some human disturbance there, mainly fishermen and women, but also space for the birds. At the main lake, the common and numerous species included Little Pied (hundreds) and Black Cormorants, and Great (hundreds), Intermediate and Little Egrets, most of them feasting on the seasonal abundance of fish.

Tricolored (Little) Grebes were also frequently heard or seen at the lake. Hundreds of Eastern Cattle Egrets occupied the shoreline and pastures, riding on buffalos. A small number of Australasian Darters and Australian Stilts were seen. Black and Brahminy Kites were almost equally common. The odd species included a Wandering Whistling Duck, two Australian Pelicans, a party of five Pied Herons and a Common Kingfisher.

The fields and the grassland beyond Muapitine village were also a good spot to scan the forested ridges of the Nino Konis Santana National Park with a scope. My only Yellow-crested Cockatoos, a pair in a large tree, were seen there, being first located by their raucous calls. Golden-headed and Zitting Cisticolas were common in the roadside grass.

At Malahara River, where the flooding had cut the road, birds were just teaming on the track. Most of them were Paddyfield Pipits, several dozens of them. A party of 30 Five-colored Munias was there and I also discovered five Tricolored Parrotfinches in tall roadside vegetation, by a fallow field. Black-faced Cuckooshrikes seemed to love the flooded forest at water's edge. The best species was, however, White-bellied Chat, a Timor endemic. Three males were readily found at the end of the passable track. In there, a largish (2.5 m) Saltwater Crocodile was sunning itself, underlining the need to look around in the unusual conditions.



Fig. 8. Male White-bellied Chats at Lake Iralalaro, in grey early morning.

Clouds hung over the hills of the national park, and there was rain over there, but I never experienced heavy rain by the lake or on the Malahara River Trail. On the first visit, the two periods of light rain were more refreshing than a problem. On the second one, it was raining lightly for half of the time, but birding was good nonetheless.

Malahara River Trail

This was the key site, as pointed out by Colin Trainor, for Timorese endemics. I went there twice, on the second and third of July. The track starts soon after the village of Muapitine, which had two traditional Timorese houses, unlike in the two settlements prior to it. The road was crossed by flood waters also before Muapitine, but the 30 to 40 cm deep water there was not too deep for the RAV4. With the access to Tutuala cut, there was no traffic beyond Muapitine except me, and a number of villagers who went to fish at the edge of the flood.

Start looking for the trailhead after the Muapitine village. Just when you leave the village proper, a stream lined with trees runs under the track. Open grassland follows, bordered by the lake on the left and by a steep forested ridge on the right. After 900 to 1000 meters, the Malahara River Trail starts on the right, across some cultivated land before entering the forest. The forest is already degraded, with trees cut and gardens expanded, and will probably not stay there forever.

Colin advised me to drive off the main road and to follow the track for a few hundred meters, and park the car there. The situation had changed, however, and the beginning of the trail had been closed by not just one but three gates: first by the road, second two hundred meters later and third at the edge of the forest. After my initial visit, one landlord even strengthened these barriers! The RAV4 was therefore parked in front of the first gate, which had space for it. I left my scope on the floor, after having covered it by black plastic, a 200 liter rubbish bag. A bag like that is a versatile thing to have: Make three holes and you have a rain coat!



Fig. 9. The first gate at the entrance of Malahara River Trail. Notice the gap for pedestrians.

The trail goes through small farmsteads and the gates in the beginning, before entering the forest, running across two undulating hills before it arrives at Malahara River, with a garden and an open area with a sign which states that one is about to enter the Nino Konis Santana National Park. This is the favorite fishing point for some of the villagers. There is an access to the water by a water level metering device, and the trail continues under the shade of large trees, following an unmarked national park boundary.

My first walk on the trail took six and half hours between 8.30 AM and 3 PM. The second one took about the same time, between 7.15 AM and 2 PM. I walked a total of about 6 km return, spending a lot of time attracting birds with my mp3 recordings (thank you very much, people of XenoCanto!) and scanning the undergrowth and canopy for shy species. There were a few mosquitoes by the river, but not on the rest of the trail.

The people Muapitine and Malahara were nice and polite, and some warmly welcomed me to watch birds there. There was the one exception, a middle-aged landlord mentioned earlier, who was more than average interested in my activities. In a way, this is understandable. According to Colin, there have been now defunct plans for hydroelectric development and the man may initially have associated me with the project. I believe that his observations eventually confirmed him that I was there only for birds and nothing else.

Communication with the locals was a bit limited, because I spoke neither Tetun Dili nor Indonesian (excluding an explanation that I was birdwatching), but my hundred words in Portuguese and their limited knowledge of English made the interaction possible. Their behavior made it clear that I had a permit to walk the trail.



Fig. 10. The cultivated section: fields, gardens and remnant trees.



Fig. 11. The open, degraded forest was surprisingly good for observing the target species. For example, Timor Flycatchers, Sunda Bush Warblers and Timor Stubtails were seen at this spot.



Fig. 12. The national park sign, at the riverside opening. Kakatua Baber Kinur...

I never went further than 400 meters beyond the riverside opening, which proved to be the site for Cinnamon-banded Kingfishers, which held a territory there, being somewhat accustomed to people. With a view to the canopy and to the sky, I was also rewarded by a Timor Green Pigeon, a rather yellowish male. I also heard them calling a couple times. Additionally, three Bonelli's Eagles were soaring over the hills, a strange sight so far away from the species' main distribution in the arid mountains of Africa, Europe and the Middle East.



Fig. 13. A Cinnamon-banded Kingfisher; one of the jewels of the forests in Timor.

The river had *leucomelanus* White-breasted Water Hen, an expected future split with their dark heads and alternative calls, a Striated Heron, Nankeen Night-Herons, a pair of Red-cheeked Parrots, a Common Kingfisher, two Red-chested Flowerpeckers and a number of noisy Broad-billed Flycatchers. The shady section after the opening, on the other hand, was excellent for Timor Leaf Warblers, Timor Stubtails and Plain Gerygones, and also had a Spectacled Monarch.



Fig. 14. A *leucomelanus* White-breasted Water Hen at Malahara River, with its dark face.

The relatively open middle section of the trail was best for pigeons and doves in the mornings. The endemic Slaty Cuckoo Doves (6) were there, together with Emerald Doves and a number of Black-backed Fruit-Doves, one of which was momentarily observed at one meter distance in a low tree. Pink-headed Imperial Pigeons were frequently heard but actually seen only once, on top of a tall tree. Another spot favored by *Columbiade* was a small riverside thicket between the river access and the opening with a sign. There apparently was some sort of food source there.



Fig. 15. A Dusky Cuckoo Dove keeps its eyes on an intruder, who appears to be after it.

The field in the beginning of the trail had many flowering plants and was therefore occupied by dozens of Red-rumped Myzomelas (up to 50!) and a number of Flame-breasted Sunbirds (15), the male of which stands tall on the list of prettiest sunbirds. Brush Cuckoos, a Lesser Coucal, Blue-tailed and Rainbow Bee-eaters, White-breasted and Black-faced Woodswallows, Long-tailed Shrikes and a lone Five-colored Munia also frequented the fields.

The open woodland around the gardens had two Wallacean Cuckooshrikes, Australian Koels, Pied Chats, a White-bellied Chat and a Wallacean Drongo. Indonesian, Yellow-eared and Streaky-breasted Honeyeaters were also present, with more of the latter two seen further along the trail. Surprisingly, only one Short-tailed Starling could be found.



Fig. 16. A Black-chested Myzomela guards its flower garden. Notice the red crest and 'beard'!

By the second gate, the very limited range Timor Coucal held a territory on the right, being reliably present each time the site was passed. Others were calling in a distance, and impossible to observe. My only Spot-breasted White-eye was also seen at this spot, early in the morning. An odd-paired addition to the trip list was a pair of Timor Figbirds, more common at Mundo Perdido. Seldom are the male and the female as dissimilar as with this species. A Timor Friarbird could definitely be identified once.

The parrots and parakeets were mostly seen at the forest edge, being remarkably skulking but nevertheless observable at close distance at certain fruiting trees. I saw Marigold and Olive Lorikeets, and an Olive-shouldered Parrot (two also at the Malahara River), contrary to my expectations for Lautem.

Soon after the third gate, a skulking but curious Timor Stubtail arrived to boldly inspect me, when I was silently waiting for a Timor Blue Flycatcher to give better views. The stubtails were seen in this area, and along the shady part of the trail beyond the national park sign, but also heard at other sections. The flycatchers favored the semi-open first half of the forest trail, several of them being reliably present at both visits.

Black-banded Flycatchers, on the other hand, were scarce, staying deep in the shadows under low trees and bushes, around the tallest hill of the trail, before the descent to the river. I first noticed one by its song, the second bird being recorded while waiting for an Orange-sided Thrush to appear.

Three Orange-sided Thrushes had been heard singing in the flooded forest. At the highest hill (more like a mound), I made a try to attract the closest one with a recording, and got an immediate response. The bird moved around me, aggressively defending its territory. I could, however, not see it because of a miscalculation on my part. I had expected a *Zoothera* to be terrestrial, but it actually preferred mid-canopy. At the chosen spot, there was a good view to the ground, covered by leaf litter, but no visibility higher up. I moved some 30 meters to an open spot and the bird followed me there, giving excellent perched views!

Species common throughout in the forest included Fawn-breasted Whistler, Olive-brown Oriole, Helmeted Friarbird, Horsfield's and Gould's Bronze Cuckoo, White-shouldered Triller, Northern and Arafura Fantail, Sunda Bush Warbler (surprisingly common) and Ashy-bellied White-eye, four of them endemic to this part of the Lesser Sundas. Timor (Golden) Whistler was recorded only twice; a male and a female gave perfect views in the middle section of the trail.

In a flooded gully by the 'Zoothera hill', a possible Buff-banded Thicket-warbler responded to a Xeno Canto recording, the song matching with the mp3-file. It was not possible to go closer to get a look. I nevertheless later learned that the species had not been observed in Lautem, at least not inland. A straggler, a range extension, or another species mimicking the song?

All in all, the trail was remarkably productive for such a limited area. In general, the birds of Timor-Leste were easy to see once one got to the right habitat.

Mundo Perdido

The mountain of Mundo Perdido may be discovered by following these directions: Driving towards Baucau on the coastal road, one eventually passes the airport of Cakung, the longest runway in the nation. Three and half kilometers beyond it, there is the junction of Old and New Baucau, with the 24 hour petrol station and supermarket. Going straight, one arrives in Old Baucau and needs to find a way through in order to continue to Lautem and Los Palos. Turning right, one arrives in New Baucau, on the way to Ossu, Mundo Perdido and Viqueque.

Towards New Baucau, the downhill road first meets a busy market roundabout. The idea is to turn right, and drive through the market, first straight and then left, at a relatively obvious junction lined with stalls. Just follow the main flow of traffic to the left. At a T-junction lower down, turn right. You are on the Ossu road.

It is about 46 km to Ossu, where the crest of the hill has an obvious parking spot and open grassy pasture, right in front of the towering slopes of Mundo Perdido. Across the road, there is a small

chapel with a telecom tower. This is where one should park one's car in order to follow a trail up to the slopes. Reaching the forest and scoring with the main target species is not too difficult, even though the trail and the pasture may be muddy and slippery. Cows have damaged it. Beware of cow pies, too...



Fig. 17. The crest of the hill at Ossu, a chapel and a telecom tower.



Fig. 18. A view to the opposite direction: Mundo Perdido and its veil of mist. Parking space on gravel. The trail starts at the end of the pasture, to the right.

About 10 km later, after first turning left at a Y-junction, one arrives to a bridge, a second large one beyond Ossy. The first was under repairs during my visit, with a bypass. The track to Hotel

Wailakurini (signposted) is the first one on the left, after a cemetery, in a tight corner. This is the base to bird the area, unless you are ready to camp.

My first attempt to visit Mundo Perdido was a bizarre one. The man in charge of Hotel Wailakurini had contacted a guide, as requested by me, and the guide was supposed to take me to the lower slopes to look for the target species. The hotel guy however wanted to join us, to guarantee that everything went well (hah!). There was an agreement that we would leave at 5 AM, to make it sure to arrive at Mundo Perdido at dawn. I had explained why I needed to be there that early and he had no objections.

At 5 AM, he was nowhere to be seen. The cook of the hotel, who had arrived to prepare breakfasts, informed that he would arrive at 7 AM! After I had told that I would go by myself in that case, the cook phoned him and he finally arrived at 6 AM. We consequently left late, arriving in Ossu just before 7 AM, to pick up the guide.

The fact that the car was parked well before the crest of the Ossu hill, did not worry me in the beginning. Well, there had to be another trail to the forest on this side. The forested slopes were close by, after all. Nope, we walked all the way up to the crest on the main road, which was lined by houses and busy with trucks and other traffic. I started to demand to know more about our plans.

The local guide agreed with my criticism and questioning about the reasons for the disastrous arrangement, and made it clear that he could have joined the journey earlier, starting from the crest, from where others had started. There never was a clear answer from the man in charge of the arrangements. We arrived in the beginning of the trail all too late at 8.30 AM, bit tired of climbing already, and the morning was already lost. I did not feel like continuing the farce any longer.

I told them so, and we stayed in the grassy pasture for couple of hours, during which I managed to see a few birds, despite having forced to tell the hotel guy to stop playing music and smoking cigarettes next to me. He clearly had no idea of what should have been done. A few Timor Imperial Pigeons and Black-backed Fruit Doves kept on calling from the high ridges and one of the latter appeared close by. A number of Timor Figbirds were seen and a party of Mountain White-eyes was a welcome addition to my trip list. A pair of Wallacean Cuckooshrikes were seen extremely well.

Nonplussed, I returned to the car with them, paid the amused guide his USD 10 fee, and took the hotel man back to Wailakurini. After a short rest, I drove back up for an afternoon observation session. He had the nerve to demand to know where I was going. I felt no need to give the information but told him that I would return for the dinner. In the evening, he 'fixed' my dysfunctional toilet, spreading mud all over the room's floor and water in the toilet. It took some time to clean the mess, and the toilet still did not work.

In the morning, I had to walk in mud around the building to get my suitcases to the car, because he had locked the connecting door. My car was also blocked by another vehicle, whose driver fortunately was awake and let me leave.

All in all, I was relieved to be able to leave the place, missing only the great Ozzie company and the food. We had had a number of lively talks with the bikers, whom I also met three times on the way back to Dili. They overtook me, stopped at some site, and overtook me again. The roads of holes are easier to navigate by a two-wheeler than by a car.

At dawn, I tackled the muddy Mundo Perdido trail by myself, returning as soon as Timor Imperial Pigeon (visible by scope from the crest in the sunny weather) and Chestnut-backed Thrush (vocal in the evenings, too) had been scored. The last missing species proved to be the small Iris Lorikeet, four of which were seen around the pasture, in addition to two Olive-headed Lorikeets. I stayed at the edge of the forest for another two hours, leaving only to tell a young bloke to stop sitting on the car. He was attempting to 'guard' it, for a fee. Fortunately, he understood and left.

Should one hire a guide at Mundo Perdido? Probably yes, because it is private land and the local custom requires some sort of request for a permit to access. In this case, it may however be best to arrange everything the day before by oneself in Ossu, and make sure to park and start at the crest of the hill, from where the distance to the forest is shortest. Even then, it is best to make clear what needs to be done and cut the diversions short.

For reasons described in this part of the report, not much was seen on the road between Baucau and Ossu. I had expected to bird all the way, but in practice it was difficult to find short privacy even to take a leak. An albino water buffalo with a snow white calf was among the best records on the road. Sacred Kingfishers were common on the hills. Otherwise, more or less the same widespread species which had already been seen at other sites.

Danau Lamessana Salt Ponds

On the way back to Dili, some shallow roadside ponds of Danau Lamessana (or soon after it) attracted my attention, because I could see a number of shorebirds with my bare eyes. A stop and a scan by a scope revealed more:

The main species was Red-capped Plover, with 24 individuals, but there were also four Malaysian Plovers in the same party. Eleven Australian Stilts and a Common Greenshank represented the larger shorebirds. A lone Sharp-tailed Sandpiper had been left behind to summer at the site, when the others had migrated to breed in the high Siberian arctic. The largest bird at the ponds was an Australian Pelican.

Roadside Observations on the North Coast

Timor Sparrow, Pale-headed Munia and Black-faced Munia proved to be difficult to locate. I focused my searches on river valley rice fields with ready to harvest crops, and on nearby reedbeds where the birds could roost in safety. The first species was recorded once, four handsome birds close to Manatuto, along the coastal road, where also a Wallacean Drongo was spotted. Likewise, two parties (12 and 40) of the second species were seen, going in and out, in the same general area. Black-faced Munias were first spotted west of the Lautem/Los Palos junction, along a bypass for another fallen bridge.

A few Zebra Finches and Tree Sparrows also occurred in the agricultural areas, and I found *sumbae* Clamorous Reed Warblers in the reeds. The grasslands had Golden-headed Cisticolas, and probably also Zitting Cisticolas. The rice paddies, on the other hand, had many Eastern Cattle Egrets, and a few Great, Intermediate and Little Egrets, and a single White-faced Heron. A Spotted Kestrel was located on the first leg of the drive to Baucau and another two on the way back to Dili. A roadside Buff-banded Rail was a surprise in one village.

The coastal road (I would not call it a highway) was best for Barred Doves, which were also seen along the Los Palos road. The species was common but not numerous, contrary to expectations. Perhaps they are hunted? Spotted Doves were here and there, and once, there was an Emerald Dove standing on the tarmac, and a lone fly-by Black-backed Fruit Dove. The striking Island Collared Doves, two of which were recorded, were found in situations of low succulent vegetation next to the seashore.

Olive-brown Orioles, Timor Figbirds and Timor Friarbirds appeared to be most common in somewhat dry but well developed forests by the coast. I made a few stops in such places, the longest one soon after leaving Lautem towards Baucau, in a place where floods had damaged the road. That site also had a good number of Black-faced Munias, a species apparently common along dry country rivers and streams, and a Red-chested Flowerpecker. Two Sooty-headed Bulbuls were also recorded, and two Australasian Bush Larks.

The largest concentration of swallows (Pacific, Striated), Tree Martins and wood swallows (White-breasted, Black-faced) was around a burning pasture soon after leaving Dili. There were a total of 150 of them hunting insects by the fire. All these species were also common in Lautem. Long-tailed Shrikes and Pied Chats were regularly seen along the roads, especially on hills where there was more fallow land. Short-tailed Starlings were distinctly rare, with only few observed. Large-billed Crows were regular, but not exactly common.

The sea remained completely empty, despite a number of scans along the coastal road. *Chloris* Collared Kingfishers favored the shorelines, with half a dozen birds next to one another in the best place. On the first day, I saw a Pacific Reef Egret on one of the many deserted beaches. East Timor could be suitable for more extensive beach tourism development, if the infrastructure and educated manpower was there.



Fig. 19. The north coast road at its best, close to the village of Lautem.



Fig. 20. Good forest by the coast, and the common condition of the road.

CONCLUSIONS

The soon to be forgotten problems and irritations aside, birding in Lautem and along the coastal road was a great pleasure, and several of the regional endemics simply stunning. There is more natural forest left in Timor-Leste than in the Indonesian part of Timor, and less regulations and permits to deal with. What I have heard of the Indonesian Timor is not altogether encouraging either. I would therefore like to recommend others to visit Timor-Leste for birdwatching, and to do it before the roads have deteriorated to the point cutting access to key areas, and before the scarce rural accommodations are closed down. At the current course of developments, one cannot rule out the possibility.

Six days is not enough to do justice to the birds of Timor-Leste, even though it probably was enough for me to meet the people and tackle the roads! A more relaxed itinerary including more time at Los Palos would have been desirable, with perhaps an extension to the neighboring islands. In case one is birding around Darwin, including Timor-Leste in the same package becomes a rather attractive option, also for overseas visitors. The same applies to private Lesser Sunda tours, with island hopping in the Indonesian part of the archipelago, nowadays connected with Dili via Denpasar, a practical gateway to other regional destinations, as well.



Fig. 21. "Why did you not walk closer? I would have loved to meet you, stranger... We need more tourists in Timor-Leste!" (an underwater road to Tutuala runs on the right, the Saltwater Crocodile waiting at the entrance, in case one needs help after the engine had been choked by water.)