



BIRD TOURISM REPORTS 4/2014

GUADALCANAL, SOLOMON ISLANDS, IN JULY 2014

Petri Hottola (phottola@gmail.com)

Between the 8th and 10th, and then again 12th and 15th of July, 2014, I visited the island of Guadalcanal, the administrative centre of the Melanesian state of the Solomon Islands. The following report will provide some information based on field experiences during the visit. Earlier in 2014, Markus Lagerqvist published an extensive trip report on the islands, based on 2010 and 2013 visits, but even in the short time, the situation had changed in Guadalcanal. In addition, our choices were somewhat different, in regard to accommodation, car rental and birdwatching, and the comparative results may therefore be of interest for somebody planning to visit Guadalcanal either solo or with a tour group.

In regard to field guides, Guy Dutson's *Birds of Melanesia* (2011, Helm) has opened new vistas to the regional birdlife and is recommended for all birdwatchers visiting the Solomon Islands. There is new and up-to-date information in the book, and the stunning plates are the kind of material any globetrotting birder daydreams about – dreams which may one day be realized. Dutson's regional approach creates a comprehensive view of the avifauna in this unique part of the globe. What is more, the illustration of various subspecies, often quite distinctive and with potential to be declared as full species in the future, is invaluable for a visiting birder.

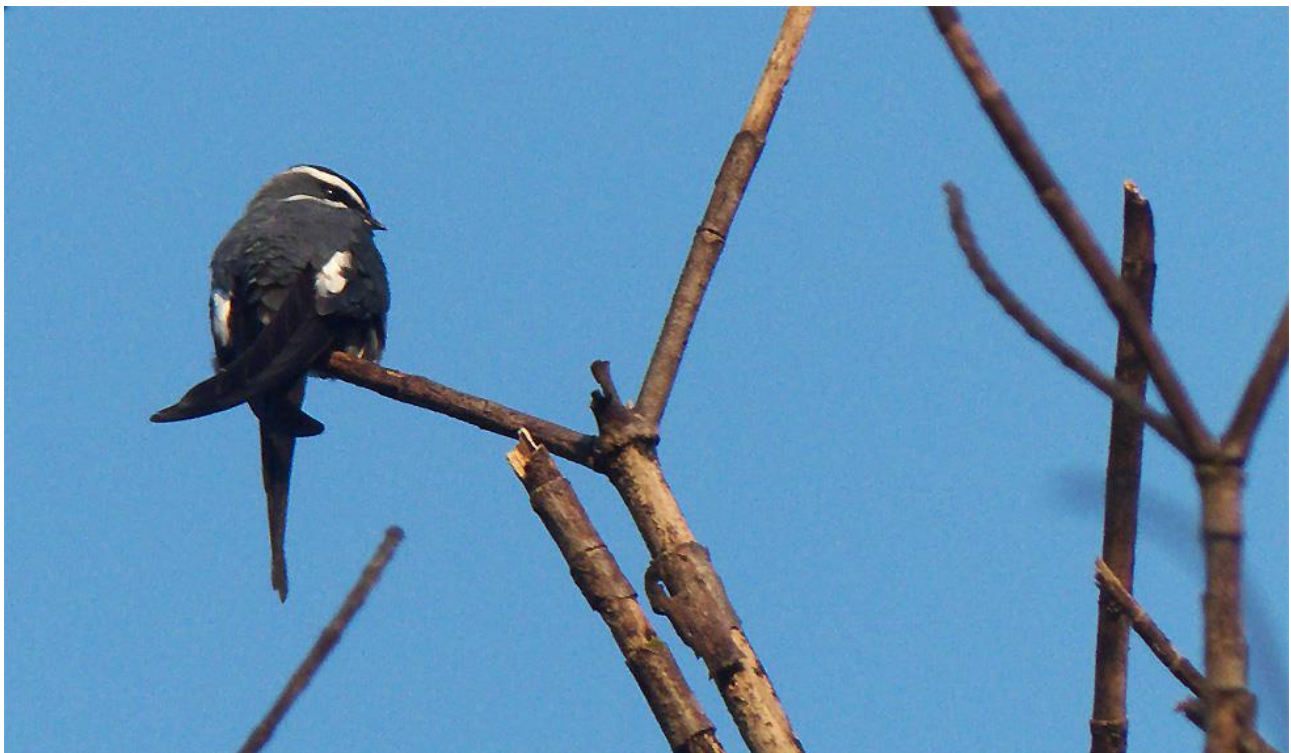


Fig. 1. A **Moustached Tree-Swift**; one of the widespread Melanesian forest birds.

FLIGHT CONNECTIONS

In summer 2014, one could fly to Solomon Islands either via Port Moresby (Air Niugini), Brisbane (Virgin Australia), Port Vila (Solomon Airlines) or Nadi (Fiji Airways). The flight situation has been a volatile one for some time, and there is plenty of outdated information in the Internet, simply because some airlines have stopped flying there and others have opened new connections. Whatever one's choice is going to be, this is not among the cheapest routes in the Pacific. In the shortage of competition, in a region where airline operations are often discouraged rather than encouraged by political disputes between nations, healthy markets have had not enough space to develop. There clearly is need for regional cooperation, in the spirit of reciprocity and equal access, to help tourism to grow, for the benefit of Melanesia as a whole. At the moment, international tourism is more about regions than nations, in terms of marketing and destination selection.

Because of my RTW mileage limit and timetables, it made sense to arrive in the Solomon Island by Fiji Airways. I had, after all, their night flight from Hong Kong to Nadi, a transit to Honiara from there, and a return flight a week later, with another Fiji Airways connection to Los Angeles on the next day. The idea was to rest at Raffles Gateway Hotel in Nadi before traveling to the USA, across the dateline. This was also the least expensive connection to Guadalcanal, the downside being the once in a week flight to and from Honiara, with stops at Port Vila, Vanuatu. Well, I could score with **Tanna Fruit-Dove** at Bauerfield, Port Vila airport, and add it on my year list... They often feed in fruiting trees by the terminal.

In reality, traveling via Fiji proved to be a costly mistake. I knew from experience that even on its best days, Fiji Airways is not able to run a regular airline service. Their computers do not work, or maybe it is the printers, and all sorts of mix ups and complicated red tape tend to cause delays. I had not, however, not yet experienced a bad day, a day when the customers are simply abandoned and left to reorganize everything by themselves. In July 2014 that happened. My recommendation therefore is: Fly in from Brisbane, Port Vila or Port Moresby, preferably on a route not dependent of a single airline connection.

Here is a short description of the chain of events: On the way in, in transit in Nadi, I first found out that I was not on the passenger list, despite having a ticket and a confirmed seat. The airline representative explained that communication between their central reservations and the airport was far from perfect and this was in fact normal. Apparently, there were also gaps in communication between Hong Kong and Nadi, as my suitcase had already been checked all the way to Honiara, even though I myself was not. Fortunately, there was a vacant seat for a passenger in transit. The departure was initially late but a major delay occurred later. Just when we were about to land in Port Vila, the captain announced that we had to return to Nadi, as weather had deteriorated at Bauerfield.

After an hour, we were back at the starting point. In the there, Vanuatu passengers were told to leave the plane and the rest of us, 85% on board, were informed that there would be direct flight to Honiara, after a short while. The initial relief was soon forgotten as it took another hour to prepare the plane, and two and half hours to match our boarding passes with their passenger lists, which apparently missed some names also at this point. We flew to Guadalcanal, arriving in Honiara at night, when all the services were already closed. Fortunately, I met a helpful Solomon Airlines lady, who checked my Rennell connection after hours.

What is more, I met Atkin, one of the regular airport taxi drivers who had also served some birding tour groups. With him, there was no need to talk about the requirements of birdwatching, such as punctuality early in the morning. He took me to the King Solomon Hotel, stopping en route at Pacific Casino Hotel, where I could change enough cash for the whole visit, for a better rate than anywhere else in Honiara. I rather not think too much about the factors behind the rate: gambling, cash flows, currency exchange... You connect the dots...



Fig. 2. Most of the Honiara taxis have plenty of trunk space. A taxi line at the airport international arrivals.

All this was normal with Fiji Airways, in retrospect a pleasant prelude to a horrific return journey. On the 14th of July, Sabrina, the helpful receptionist of Sanalea Apartments checked the situation of my Nadi flight and found out that it had been canceled. Sensing major problems, as this was the only connection that week and I needed to be in Nadi in two days to reach Los Angeles, I drove straight to Guadalcanal Travel Services, at Point Cruz, the Center of Honiara. GTS is the travel agent in Honiara which makes things to happen. Together with other stranded passengers, we found out that there had been no rerouting and no, we could not fly to Nadi via Port Moresby or Brisbane the next day, on the expense of Fiji Airways.

To cut a long story short, I managed to buy a seat on Virgin Australia to Brisbane and swapped my canceled Honiara – Nadi flight to a Fiji Airways flight from Brisbane to Nadi the next day. All this required a cancellation of my final visit to Mt. Austen. The last budget room at Brisbane Ibis Airport was reserved in the Internet, as a courtesy of Sanalae Apartments, and a visa to Australia purchased at the airport, with the help of Virgin Australia. Altogether, I had to pay more than €300 extra to get to Nadi early enough, the options being very limited indeed. A better connection on Air Niugini was available in theory, but it had been blocked by Fiji Airways.

Well, I neither saw their representative at the airport, nor received any information in regard to the situation. Back in Nadi, not a single word of apology, not to mention compensation. Fiji Airways was too busy with arguing with Solomon Airlines to think about their stranded customers. There was a political dispute between the nations, and the flights had been canceled indefinitely. The blockage continues even now, in August 2014. Fiji Airways had been able to fly to Solomon Islands but Fiji had not granted Solomon

Airlines similar rights. Instead, FA had declared that they were going to have more connections to Honiara, thereby interfering with the Solomon Airlines business. The bullying had resulted in a negative reaction by the Solomon Islands Civil Aviation Authority. Both nations and their tourism would suffer, and Fiji Airways (formerly Air Pacific) would damage its reputation.

Fortunately, none of my reorganized flights were late and I did make it to Los Angeles. As a result, crossing the Pacific did, however, become quite an ordeal, 26 hours on board of airplanes or at airport waiting areas. I was not a happy camper in the Nadi transit area, once again listening the local bands who appear to be there to soften the blow of unreliable services. Nevertheless, I had also gained something on the way. At sunrise in Brisbane, there was a **Letter-winged Kite** in front of the International Terminal, and I had consequently finally seen my last missing Australian bird of prey! What a stroke of luck in the middle of an airline nightmare! The high platform in front of the departures is a good bird observation point.

ACCOMMODATION

Wherever one is going to sleep in Honiara, it is not going to be cheap. The price-quality ratio is, however, much better than in the neighboring PNG, even though not as good as in Vanuatu or Fiji. The choices are limited, and there is a need to consider several issues other than the room rate, such as location. A good rest is desirable, especially if one keeps on traveling and birding for several weeks, or months in a row.



Fig. 3. The 'kitsch colonial' style reception hall of King Solomon Hotel, Honiara.

King Solomon Hotel

I stayed in this hotel for two nights because Sanalae Apartments was fully booked and King Solomon appeared to be the second best choice. My room was in the first floor, where their budget accommodation is located, and it was a good choice in regard to access, peace and equipment (AC, television, fridge, kettle). The hotel restaurant and bar were conveniently close by for meals and drinks, including a take-away pizza. Breakfast (SBD 100, €10) was not included. The reception was helpful and efficient. The room was not, however, satisfactory in terms of cleanliness. The cups were dirty and sheets stained, to mention two examples. For the second night, I got cleaner sheets. For SBD 850 (€87) per night, one could however expect more, even though I have earlier had some terrible dumps in Melanesia for even higher price. That was in Port Moresby, PNG, which probably has the worst price-quality ration for accommodation on Earth.

King Solomon Hotel is located on Hibiscus Avenue, right next to Australian consulate and Point Cruz, and also relatively close to Honiara Botanical Garden. In satellite images, one may see a tight cluster of buildings next to an empty lot, on the south side of the avenue.

Sanalae Apartments

I stayed at Sanalae Apartments for three nights, between 12th and 15th of July. Before the stay I left my suitcase and telescope at their storage, on the 9th of July, because luggage restrictions prevented me from taking them with me to Rennell Island. Sanalae Apartments is known to be the top choice in Honiara and it lived up to its reputation. The main problem is the popularity of the apartments, frequented by diplomats, for example. Sanalae Apartments may well be fully booked and it pays to reserve early, preferably earlier than six months before one's arrival. In July 2014, one night in a small double with a king size bed cost SBD 880 (€90), a much better deal than at the King Solomon Hotel despite the slightly higher price.

They have high walls and 24 h security, and parking space for at least 8 cars. The rooms are modern (European style) and well equipped, including a kitchenette with all the basic utensils (salt and pepper is provided). Everything is clean and tidy. Sabrina, at the reception, replied my emails promptly at the reservation stage and helped with a number of practicalities on site, together with the manager. The rooms have both a ceiling fan and air-conditioning. I had some problems with my AC, though, and had to change rooms after the first night. There is a common washing machine and space for drying the clothes. All in all, it is a place where one may relax in peace and comfort.

Sanalae Apartments is located on a side street above a ridge, about 2 km towards the airport from the Pacific Casino Hotel. The location is just right for visiting Mt. Austen, Betikama Wetland and Meat Lovers, the best meat shop in Guadalcanal. Arriving from the airport, turn left at the first left hand street junction beyond (500 m) Honiara Golf Course and Club, drive the tarmac up left to a ridge, turn right and find the hotel 200 meters later, on the right along the gravel street. In satellite images, it is a walled area with two buildings and parking area in-between them.

Pacific Casino Hotel

Many birders have stayed at this well-established hotel, but I decided otherwise for the following reasons:
1) The quality of the rooms apparently does not always meet the expectations, and the rooms are not

particularly cheap, either, 2) It is right next to the busy Kukum Highway between the airport and Honiara CBD (traffic noise), 3) The prostitution/gambling/drinking scene is not my favorite environment. I prefer to rest in the evenings, in a less lively place like Sanalae Apartments, 4) The location (convenient for birding sites) and activities raise questions in regard to security, also in regard to one's rental vehicle. It is, however, largely a matter of taste. I have not read many complaints from birders who have stayed there.

Pacific Casino Hotel is not far from the Honiara CBD, about 1 km towards the airport beyond the Matanikau River Bridge, the only bridge east of the CBD. It is 500 meters more to the Vura 2 junction, up right to Mt. Austen, and about 1.5 km more to the Sanalae Apartments junction (again, to the right). In satellite images, one notices a long building by the sea, with swimming pools and parking space by the highway.

FOOD AND DRINKS

My stay at King Solomon Hotel was so short, that a breakfast and a pizza at the hotel was enough for me, in addition to snacks and drinks. At Sanalea Apartments, it was all about self-catering. Their units have kitchenettes and food could be bought at local shops. I would say that I had my best meals of the whole RTW tour at Sanalae Apartments, made out of fresh and high quality ingredients.

I bought my groceries at Wing Supermarket, at Point Cruz, inland side. Their selection was fair, but lacking in fresh meat and dairy products. After discovering the Meat Lovers, and its rich supply of high grade Vanuatu beef, other meat delights and cheese, I knew where to go the next time. The popular meat shop was located opposite of Pacific Casino Hotel and its parking area was always well occupied by happy customers. In front of the shop, fresh vegetables and fruit could also be purchased.

Beware of Saturdays and Sundays. Many shops and supermarkets close early on Saturdays, even though one always finds an open minimarket, and are in general closed on Sundays. Much like in the rest of Melanesia, missionaries have introduced a sterner version of Christianity there, if compared to Europe, for example. Well, missionaries seldom represent the main stream of their religions.

TAXI AND CAR RENTAL

On the 9th of July, a visit was made at Betikama Wetland, together with a suitcase storage drop and prepayment of accommodation at Sanalea Apartments, on the way to Betikama. I prefer to pay early, instead of carrying the cash around with me. The transportation was provided by Atkin, by a taxi for SBD 100 (€10) per hour. He had taken me to the King Solomon Hotel the previous evening, and also drove me to the airport the next morning, for a domestic flight to Rennell Island on the next morning. He charged SBD 100 also for the rides between Honiara CBD and the airport.

On the 12th of July, after arrival from Rennell, I expected Budget Honiara representatives to meet me at the domestic terminal, but they were nowhere to be seen. I therefore walked to the international terminal, where a security guard kindly called Budget for me. Their van arrived in 15 minutes. I was later explained that even though I had made a reservation with Budget Australia, their given agent, Budget Australia does not inform Budget Honiara about such reservations! Well done, Budget Australia... Therefore, the branch in Honiara had had no idea that I was about to arrive at the domestic terminal and had reserved a 4x4. Fortunately, the right kind of vehicle, a Nissan X-Trail, was available for me.

The rental rate was SBD 1.200 (€123) per day, and there was a SBD 6.000 (€614) deductible in case of accident or theft. They will make a SBD 6.000 reservation on your credit account and cancel it if everything is ok. In my case, problems with bank computer connections prevented cancellation in my presence, but the manager promised to sort it out on the same day. That is what she did, too, and I had no problems with my credit card bills. Just to be sure, I had requested a written statement on the situation in my rental documents and she had agreed to write one, with signature. Computer network issues are a daily problem at any office in the Solomon Islands and the rest of the region, and one may expect them to occur.

There were two issues with the car when I received it, but otherwise everything went well. I was able to return the X-Trail without any damage. The issues were: 1) The right front window was out of order, and could not be opened, which is rather inconvenient for birdwatching by a car, 2) The rental agency could not fill the tank up because of a dispute with a diesel supplier, and I had to try to return the vehicle with the same amount of diesel in the tank. Diesel was well available at the few petrol stations between Honiara CBD and the airport.



Fig. 4. My Budget Nissan X-Trail at Mt. Austin, by a logging track.

The 4x4 was a necessity in the changed realities of Mt. Austin. The new logging roads were steep and unstable in places, and I had to accommodate passing trucks and bulldozers on the way. This would have been difficult by a sedan. For Betikama Wetland, a regular car would have been quite sufficient. Nevertheless, I enjoyed the sturdiness of the Nissan also there, and in the center of Honiara, where size

mattered during the congested rush hours. Overall, I was quite happy with my car choice, and the service at Budget Honiara. Some things were perhaps less than perfect there, but the ladies in charge were open and informative about the shortcomings, and able to deal with them.

Because of the Fiji Airways cancellation, I had to return my X-Trail one rental day earlier than planned. I informed the Budget office about the changes a day in advance, and was able to cut my expenses a bit, in an effort to compensate the damage caused by Fiji Airways.



Fig. 5. An afternoon traffic jam on the Kukum Highway, approaching Honiara CBD.

BIRDS AND BIRDING SITES

King Solomon Hotel

The first day in Honiara was reserved for rest, recovery and travel arrangements after the long journey there: non-stop Emei – Chengdu – Hong Kong – Nadi – Honiara. I nevertheless did some birdwatching on hotel grounds in the morning, and after sunset. The King Solomon Hotel has been constructed on a steep slope and is crowded with buildings. Birdwatching proved to be difficult in the bungalow area. The best spot was down on the street-side (Hibiscus Avenue) corner of the hotel, close to the first floor rooms, where a large vacant lot and a ridge created some additional visibility and the trees provided some shade.

Common Mynas dominated the street-side scene and dozens of them also roosted at the hotel. A pair of **Willie Wagtails** had a nest in the garden, with a pair of **Olive-backed Sunbirds** in the neighborhood. Up in the sky, three **White-rumped Swiftlets** were hawking for insects. There were, however, also some Melanesian goodies around. In the morning, I spotted my first **Pied Goshawk** (pied morph), a pair of **Yellow-bibbed Lories** and another pair of **Cardinal Lories**. In the evening, a **Guadalcanal Boobook** was calling on the forested ridge above and to the west of the hotel. According to some trip reports, they also occur further in the same direction, around the botanical garden.

Overall, the hotel grounds were not really interesting for a birder but nevertheless provided the first taste of things to come.



Fig. 6. A smart **Yellow-bibbed Lory**; one of the first endemics one is likely to encounter in Guadalcanal.

Betikama Wetland

The first visit to Betikama Wetland was complicated by the fact that Betikama Adventist High School, which controls access to the area, had closed all its gates because of school holidays. Normally, one may drive straight in to the wetland, without visiting the school grounds, by proceeding straight at Lungga Power Station, the source of electricity for Honiara. On the 9th of July, Atkin drove us in to Betikama Carvings, a well know souvenir shop with WWII relics in its garden, and made an enquiry there. Next we went to the BAHS administrative office, where the person in charge (the principal of the school had left for Honiara) was eager to say no. Fortunately, the principal happened to arrive and even though also surprisingly reluctant, and talking about introducing an entrance fee in the near future, he let us to go in, together with two school boys 'because it is not 100% secure there'.

I wonder what kind of security these boys were supposed to offer, but they needed to be paid SBD 50 (€5) afterwards. Therefore, I actually paid an entrance fee! We did not go far this time. I had brought a

telescope with me, and we stayed about two and half hours in the partial shade of a large tree by the first marshy area, scanning the bird traffic from there, and discussing a number of mutually interesting topics.

On the second visit, driving in by myself in a 4x4, I had no time for nonsensical negotiations and succeeded in avoiding them. The gates remained closed but I drove in to the Betikama Carvings, walked in to the building and asked the first member of staff if it was ok to park my car there to visit the wetland for birdwatching. After permission, I walked to the marsh by myself and stayed there till sunset, without any problems. This time I walked a side track beyond the first marsh, where a round overgrown lake was discovered between the hills. I had seen the hidden lake when we landed in Honiara. Later, I also climbed on top of the grassy ridges above the track, to gain a view of the whole area.

The star species of the wetland is **Solomons Sea Eagle**, and they were readily seen on both visits. There were at least two adults and a darker, juvenile bird. A **Melanesian Kingfisher** (*(chloris) tristrami alberti*) had a territory at the swamp. The marshes had a variety of egrets (**Great, Intermediate, Eastern Cattle**), a **Striated Heron**, **Little Pied Cormorants**, **Pacific Black Ducks**, **Australian Swamphen** with their black chicks, and a lone **White-browed Crake**. The lush lakeside forests were favored by parrots, doves and starlings. **Solomons Cockatoos** and **Eclectus Parrots** were particularly common at Betikama, together with **Yellow-bibbed** and **Cardinal Lories**. A few **Coconut Lorikeets** and a pair of *heteroclitus* **Song Parrots** were also recorded. *Rufigula* **Red-knobbed Imperial Pigeons** and **Mackinlay's Cuckoo-Doves** were present and I also saw my first **Claret-breasted Fruit Dove**, a male, at Betikama.



Fig. 7. The overgrown lake, a section of Betikama Wetlands. The white dots on top of a tree are **Solomons Cockatoos**. Bring your telescope!

The selection of starlings and their relatives included **Metallic, Singing** and **Brown-winged Starlings**, and **Long-tailed Mynas**. **Dollarbirds** were noisy and attractive at the edge of the marsh, together with **White-bellied Cuckoo-Shrikes**. *Toxopei* **Australian/Clamorous Reed Warblers** were surprisingly silent in July, but I nevertheless managed to locate two. **Pacific Swallows** were observed only at Betikama and at Sanalea Apartments. In the general area, the common coastal species (**Willie Wagtail, White-rumped Swiftlet, Olive-backed Sunbird, Common Myna**) were present. Last but not least, I finally saw a pair of **Buff-headed Coucals** on the second visit, basking in the evening sun on top of a tall tree, after inexplicably having failed to see these large birds at Mt. Austin, where they were constantly growling, oftentimes quite close to me. Another coucal was calling deep in the lakeside thickets.

Mt. Austen

The access to Mt. Austen was easy to find. Driving towards Honiara CBD, from the direction of airport/Sanalea Apartments, one turns left just after Woodford International School (signposted) and continues uphill on Vura 2 (not signposted). There are junctions on the way, including a four-way one busy with people waiting for taxis and buses, but one needs to keep on driving straight uphill, leaning towards the right. At the edge of the suburbia, the military monument of Mt. Austen is seen on the right. After the next climb, steep uphill, one may expect to meet somebody to collect the 'entrance fee', SBD 100 (€10; more below), before veering left, on a gravel track. Follow the main track uphill and look for remaining forest. It is more about exploration than set guidelines, for reasons explained below.

The situation at Mt. Austen is a volatile one. Even though Honiara had experienced a devastating flood in spring 2014, as a result of unsustainable logging on the slopes above it, a major new logging operation had already started at Mt. Austen. As a result, I never visited the usual route with a 'grassy opening' and downhill tracks to Lungga River, but followed the new logging roads which were literally constructed in front of me, and lead to slightly higher grounds, where extensive forest still existed, for the time being. The new tracks would descend towards the Lungga River, too, after the construction was completed. To be frank, I am not quite sure where I was because the new tracks were not on maps. According to my GPS, I was mostly in the 350 to 450 m altitude range.

I am afraid that not much will be left in 2015. Moreover, as I explained to the locals, they may now expect another flood of major magnitude, as a direct result of the developments. One does not normally cut tropical forests on such steep slopes, because the risks are all too obvious, even for logging companies.

Trucks were carrying timber away, bulldozers were bulldozing the roads further in, and chainsaws could be heard all over the place on the weekdays. Logging camps were established here and there. Nevertheless, the forest was teeming with birds, which were observed with a heavy heart: All this would soon be gone... Such diversity reduced to scrap... What was going to happen to these birds after their breeding environment was destroyed? I nevertheless followed my plan, by investing more time on Mt Austen than international visitors have recently done. In regard to endemic species, this proved to be sound tactic.



Fig. 8. Komatsu machinery at the summer 2014 logging area, Mt. Austen.

The following list includes all the 38 observed bird species. I could not really have hoped more than one or two additional species for the last visit, which had to be canceled. They were **Solomons Monarch** and **Grey-throated White-eye**. For the former, I had planned to focus on thickets, and if successful with the monarch, drive higher up than on the previous visits. The latter species could occur at 450-500 m altitude.

I had, after all, focused my efforts on a relatively small area, largely around a high ridge Y-crossing (Fig. 9). From there, I either drove about 300 meters left, up to a very productive vantage point (too steep and rough for a sedan), or explored the right fork about 1.5 km down the hill, to the end of the drivable track. I did not expect to see a **Woodford's Rail**. There was no vegetation on the shoulders of the new tracks, and I do not think the species has recently been seen at Mt. Austen. I may well be wrong, though.

Brahminy Kite: A single adult frequented the Y-crossing area.

Pied Goshawk: 1 pied morph adult and 1 dark morph adult.

Blyth's Hornbill: Common and inquisitive in the 400 to 500 m altitude forests, with a total of 13 recorded.

Red-knobbed Imperial Pigeon: Quite common on the slopes, a total of 50 recorded and often very closely studied.

Pale Mountain Pigeon: Despite extensive scanning, only one individual was seen flying towards the coast. The shape is diagnostic already before one sees the colors.



Fig. 9. The Y-crossing, surrounded by primary forest on both sides, and access to higher ground on the left. The end of the track was 1.5 km to the right. Honiara is down hill in the opposite direction, behind my back.

Claret-breasted Fruit-Dove: The most common fruit-dove in the area; a total of 16 were seen and others heard.

Yellow-bibbed Fruit-Dove: Two females and two males were seen around fruiting trees on four occasions, and another male was also calling close by. I had not expected to see the species at Mt. Austen.

Mackinlay's Cuckoo-Dove: Very common, but in most cases only heard. Nevertheless, two dozen birds were also seen.

Crested-Cuckoo Dove: On the third visit, in the afternoon, two actively calling males were heard at the left Y-fork vantage point. After placing myself in-between the birds, I played a recording (Xeno Canto) and one of the doves approached, being rather territorial. It flew over me several times, making a swooping 'display flight' twice, the shaggy crest being quite visible during the dives at me! Unforgettable views... After PNG mainland and New Britain, I have now seen all the *Reinwardtoena* cuckoo-doves.

Bronze Ground Dove: Several males were heard.

Solomons Cockatoo: Common, but not as common as at Betikama Wetland. Nevertheless, a few were always present.

Yellow-bibbed Lory: Very common, especially around fruiting trees.

Finsch's Pygmy-Parrot: Common, but difficult to see well. I saw 6 individuals, invariably in pairs.

Duchess Lorikeet: Good views of a fly-by pair; the yellow breast band shows well in flight.

Meek's Lorikeet: A single pair, also seen flying around in a lush forested valley.



Fig. 10. Mackinlay's Cuckoo-Doves are not really shy, but often difficult to see perched in a tree.

Coconut Lorikeet: A total of two identified individuals, on two occasions. A number of lorikeets were not identified, because of distance and/or unfavorable light.

Ultramarine Kingfisher: Only one pair was seen very well, attracted by my recording, and another individual was heard calling. Surprisingly scarce.

Melanesian Kingfisher: One *alberti* was seen.

Variable Dwarf Kingfisher: One *nigromaxilla* was heard, but not seen, deep in a ravine with a stream, soon after the Y-crossing, on the right.

Buff-headed Coucal: Impressive calls were made by dozens of birds but somehow I failed to see any!

Shining Bronze Cuckoo: A few. Three subspecies may be present in July, two of them migratory.

Chestnut-bellied Monarch: Excellent views of three individuals, always low by the logging track.

Cockerell's Fantail: One *cockerelli* was seen by the track in the last morning; the erect posture attracted my attention already before the details were seen by a scope.

Moustached Tree-Swift: Relatively common.

White-rumped Swiftlet: Relatively common.

Uniform Swiftlet: One pair was observed at 300 m above the sea level. Definitely not Mayr's...

Oriole Whistler: Heard a few times but only once observed: a male gave great views when searching for food in a canopy of a tree, at the left Y-fork observation point. According to Dutson, it is the males who do this, whereas the females stay low in the forest. Strange...

Dollarbird: A total of 7 birds were seen.

Solomons Cuckooshrike: Not uncommon at Mt. Austen; a total of 8 were identified.

Barred Cuckooshrike: Relatively common; *pusilla*.

White-bellied Cuckooshrike: Common and noisy.

Grey-capped Cicadabird: A total of 5 *saturation* were observed, sometimes mixed with other cuckooshrikes.



Fig. 11. Solomons Cockatoos were bold, noisy and common in forest habitats.



Fig. 12. A documentary shot with two of the eight **White-eyed Starlings**, a juvenile and an adult, together with a **Red-knobbed Imperial Pigeon**. The birds were a bit far away for my camera.

Midget Flowerpecker: Common, but not that easy to see well. My first pair, seen low in a bush at a distance of five meters, turned out to be the best views of this pretty species.

Black-headed Myzomela: Quite common at Mt. Austen, at the edges of the forests.

Brown-winged Starling: The common starling of the mid-level highland forests; a total of 74 were recorded.

White-eyed Starling: Probably my best record at Mt. Austin. On the last visit, a party of 8 were observed for an hour on top of a large tree towering above the forest! Two of them were adults with elongated central rectrices and six juveniles. Great views with a scope and some documentary photos.

Long-tailed Myna: Common and noisy.

White-billed Crow: More often heard than seen. My only seen birds were a pair flying across a valley. Overall, surprisingly difficult to record.

A few words on the 'entrance fee':

In regard to the Mt. Austin 'entrance fee', confusion ruled. The collection was not organized and there was no sign with information. On what grounds the road toll was collected, one could only wonder. Some of the local cars stopped to pay, others did not. Moreover, anybody in the area, including 'prospectors' from Honiara, could try their luck if the main collectors were not around. SBD 100 is a large sum of money, and it attracts shady figures. My advice is: Pay only for the day of entrance, ask the name of the collector, and take a photo of him. Chances are that the next person you meet will claim that you have not paid, and the person you gave the money was not entitled to collect money in the first place. It helps to be able to name somebody. If the next person is a villager and he knows the collector, the discussion will end there.

Personally, I had some arguments with road toll collectors not belonging to the community. For them, intimidating the foreigners appeared to be a common tactic to extract money. People would say that you were trespassing, and spying (!), and even attempted to enter the car. In the end, however, everybody agreed that I had already paid for the day and did not need to pay in advance for tomorrow. On the last day, however, the collector was not at the agreed point at the agreed time, neither in the morning nor in the afternoon, apparently because of the FIFA World Cup final, and the consequent partying. There seldom is anybody there before the sunrise, but one may stop and pay on the return journey. All this may sound more complicated (and threatening) than it actually was. Keep your calm and stand your ground, defending the proper procedure.

Up on the logging roads, on the other hand, I occasionally encountered men with machetes (their working tools). As a rule, I was politely left in peace or even welcomed. To minimize the risk, I nevertheless kept distance and made sure nobody came between myself and the open driver's door of the Nissan. The rest of the doors were locked. Even a remotest chance of getting slashed by a machete needs to be eliminated...

I was also open about my activities and equipment. I had, after all, a right to be there and did not interfere with the logging operations. On the contrary, I was the one who gave the way to their trucks, by driving off the road. The relations between me and the loggers consequently remained amicable. In three days, there was only one exception. On Sunday, when the two logging camps were idle, the headman of the other one, a bully with a hangover, decided to become suspicious of my activities. From a hill, he had repeatedly seen me watching something and taking photographs. As a consequence, I was approached by him and four other men, all of them armed with machetes.

On a closer look, they saw that I was looking for birds and soon lost interest, except the headman, who apparently felt a need to show his authority. He told me to visit the camp. Not ready to place myself in such a vulnerable position, I told him that I had not time to do so, because I was busy with birdwatching. As a result, the headman returned to the camp and left me in peace.

If in doubt, local guides (e.g. Samson Hoasi) are available and may reduce the risks even further (see Markus Lagerqvist's report). Guadalcanal is not a particularly dangerous destination and the vast majority of its people are welcoming, without self-serving agendas. It is only the odd problem individuals with self-serving agendas, who may cause temporary hassle.



Fig. 13. A tropical forest is always a wonder for somebody from the northern hemisphere, even though we also have our share of natural wonders up in the north.

Honiara

Driving around on the Kukum Highway produced a short list of noteworthy records. My first pair of **Finsch's Pygmy-Parrots** was seen while waiting for a taxi at an intersection. My only **Tree Sparrows**, five birds, were seen at a petrol station. In the last morning, on the way to the airport, a pied morph **Pied Goshawk** flew across the road. At Sanalae Apartments, the birds observed included a juvenile **Brahminy Kite** and four **Pacific Swallows**.

CONCLUSIONS

As often is in Melanesia, everything did not go quite as planned in Guadalcanal. Nevertheless, I was almost able to follow my plans and timetables, with the exceptions of the delay and the cancellation caused by Fiji Airways. Overall, I was pleasantly surprised by the services, infrastructure and the people, the latter particularly in tourism service positions (accommodation, car rental, airport, travel agency). The people were both more aware and educated than in some other Melanesian destinations, and interacted with respect, with rare exceptions such as the 'unlicensed' road toll collectors on the way to Mt. Austen.

The situation with access was clearly more relaxed than in the neighboring PNG, more like in Vanuatu. At Mt. Austen, the extra time and effort produced a longer than expected species list, including the **White-eyed Starling**, apparently not recorded there for a while. It is sad that the logging goes on, and the situation needs to be monitored. The next devastating flood might, however, change something, at the cost of human lives, if the connection between logging and floods finally became more widely established.

There must be other similarly accessible new areas on the rest of the island, which could be explored if there was time. From the plane to Rennell, I could see drivable gravel tracks quite high on the mountains. On the next visit, I will certainly stop in Guadalcanal, the gateway to the archipelago, and may try something else. Personally, I was not fit enough for the trek up to the high mountains, but preferred to focus in the mid-altitude hill forests, close to Honiara, also to maximize bird observation time.

For Australian birders, the Solomon Islands are right on their doorstep. Some of its islands (Guadalcanal, Rennell, Gizo) are easy to visit from Brisbane. For the rest of us, visiting Solomon Islands currently requires a transit in Australia. At the moment, the Fiji connection has indefinitely been closed and would probably remain unreliable even if it was established again. The last notion is not so much about personal disappointment with Fiji Airways, but a statement based on a longer history of relations in the region. There are going to be challenges to be dealt with on a visit to the Solomon Islands, and the rest of Melanesia, but they tend to be worth the effort.



Fig. 14. Back in Brisbane, Australia, experiencing the British colonial culture. Would you buy a used car from this television evangelist?