



## RENNELL, SOLOMON ISLANDS, IN JULY 2014

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**Fig. 1.** A male **Rennell Shrikebill**, the most spectacular of the island's endemics.

Between the 10th and 12th of July 2014, I was able to visit the island of Rennell (Mugaba) from Honiara, Guadalcanal. Rennell is one of the more remote islands of the Solomons, in the southeastern corner of the Solomon Sea, and is therefore relatively seldom visited by individual birders, even though it certainly is on the route of the package birdwatching tour groups which visit the archipelago annually.

Rennell has no less than seven endemic or near endemic species, and therefore holds a special place in the hearts of globetrotting listers. The species are: **Silver-capped Fruit-Dove** (*P.richardsii*), **Rennell Shrikebill** (*C.hamlini*), **Rennell Whistler** (*P.feminina*), **Rennell Fantail** (*R.rennelliana*), **Superciliated White-eye** (*W.superciliosa*), **Rennell White-eye** (*Z.rennellianus*) and **Rennell Starling** (*A. insularis*). Rennell is also a great place to observe **Mackinlay's Cuckoo-Doves**, **Pacific Imperial Pigeons**, **Song Parrots**, **Finch's Pygmy-Parrots**, **Melanesian Kingfishers**, **Cardinal Myzomelas**, **Melanesian Flycatchers** and **Fan-tailed Gerygones**.

Among its endemic subspecies, the most interesting probably are the *pygmaeus* **Australian White Ibis**, the *hyacinthinus* **Song Parrot**, the *harterti* **Shining Bronze Cuckoo**, the *rennellianus* **Island Thrush**, the *gracilis* **Barred Cuckooshrike**, the *sanfordi* **Cardinal Myzomela**, the *occidentalis* **Melanesian Flycatcher** and the

*citrina* **Fan-tailed Gerygone**. One or two of them may eventually gain a full species status, as studies in taxonomy advance, if the birds actually survive the current developments on the island.



**Fig. 2.** A juvenile *pygmaeus* **Australian White Ibis**, a characteristic bird of the Tingoa landing stretch, village lawns and garbage dumps, and a good candidate for a full species status.

The sad fact is that much of Rennell is under logging and mining operations. It is about foreign companies making a colonial style one time rip off of resources and employing a small number of local hands in the process. What is left is a changed environment; erosion, loss of soil and dry bush instead of the lush forests which still cover significant areas in the western end of the island, close to the 'capital village' of Tingoa. Environmental resources aside, the importation of mining and logging workers on an island of 2.000 inhabitants, well paid but without much to do during their spare time, is bound to have its social consequences. A number of locals may have a full understanding of the risks involved, but the majority do not appear to care, or are more concerned about their temporary share in the business.

## **FLIGHT CONNECTIONS**

Contrary to some earlier information, Solomon Airways has changed its schedule and currently has more frequent flights to Rennell. It is consequently possible to make a two day (three nights) visit there, instead of the former three day arrangement. In summer 2014, the return flight cost SBD 1.492 (€153).

The flights will connect either directly between Honiara and Tingoa, or stop in Bellona on either way, depending on reservations and flight conditions. In Rennell, the airfield may be sensitive to fog early in the morning, but the air normally clears by 8 AM. At grass landind strips such as the one in Tingoa, visibility is all important, also to make sure that nobody is walking on the runway. The 'summering' **Pacific Golden Plovers** and the resident **Australian White Ibises** know how to behave when they hear the sound of an approaching Twin Otter.



**Fig. 3.** On the way to Rennell Island, aboard Solomon Airlines De Havilland DHC-6 Twin Otter.

On the 10th of July, my contact in Honiara, Atkin the taxi driver, picked me for a ride to the airport at 5.20 at King Solomon Hotel, the departure being at 6.30. Atkin had checked the situation the day before and found out that the plane would leave earlier than the official departure time, the time of my confirmed tickets. In Melanesia, do not expect to depart or arrive according to shedule!

At the domestic terminal, the procedured was fast and relaxed. At the security check, the officer asked what I had in my one liter Fiji water bottle: Cold tea! Admittedly, the bottle looked like it was full of something stronger... On arrival, half of Tingoa seemed to be there, greeting the arriving passengers or simply enjoying the spectacle. I had left my large suitcase and telescope in Honiara, at Sanalea Apartments, and had only hand luggage with me, carefully stored in the front storage unit, together with other perishable cargo.

After an inquiry, the officer in charge of the airfield not only pointed me to Moreno Rest House, a sprawling two storey building located at the beginning of the landing stretch, but employed a young man on his way to the same direction as my guide, to guarantee that I would not miss the guesthouse. Well, the building would have been hard to miss. It is on the left, just before entering the forest, and offers great views to the landing airplanes.

On departure, I learned too late that my return should have been confirmed at the Solomon Airlines village shop office the day before, a task which would have had little appeal during the hot mid-day hours, in-

between the morning and afternoon bird runs. Fortunately, there was a seat for me, even though the plane was almost full on that particular morning, and picked additional passengers also in Bellona.

We went to the office already at 6.40, by the guesthouse car, to secure the seat. The long wait, till 8.45, was made shorter by bird observations and chatting with the locals, mostly about the need to conserve the remaining forest to preserve water, soil and humidity on the island. The village of Tingoa is a dry place, a compelling evidence of things to come if all the forest is clearcut. Bellona has more farms and people, and therefore not much birdlife left. During the transit, my only bird there was a lone **Bridled Tern**.



**Fig. 4.** The Eagle... hmmph... the Otter has landed on the Tingoa air strip.



**Fig. 5.** Do not plan to carry much: My Travelite bag, Rogue hat and a €10 Chinese trekking pole.



**Fig. 6.** Tingoa, the capital village of the Rennell Island, which has less than 2.000 inhabitants.

## **ACCOMMODATION, FOOD AND DRINKS**

Having read some trip reports in the Internet, notably the ones published by Jon Hornbuckle and Markus Lagerqvist, a dated and up-to-date one (both informative), I decided to stay at Tingoa, instead of venturing to the more touristic Lake Tenggano and its lodges. This proved to be a sound decision. In Tingoa, I had affordable accommodation right next to a track leading to the best forests on the island, a village shop at a walking distance and an equally short distance to the airfield and Solomon Airways office at the back of the above-mentioned shop. Moreover, it was easy walking on a level track instead of the rocky terrain encountered by Markus at Lake Tenggano.

Moreno Rest House has some 15 rooms, which are simple but comfortable. I got a single with my own balcony (another bed there, for resting) for SBD 250 (€26) per night. Electricity was available in the evenings, for lights, and food could be prepared in a communal kitchen (gas stoves) close by. Toilets and showers were in a separate building, in the back. In practise, I did not cook food, unlike the Hong Kong Chinese guests who stayed for months, but ordered dinners for the evenings and otherwise relied on fruit and snacks, not to mention some rye crisps, canned pork and 'salmiakki' (salty liquorice) imported from Finland for the stay.

The high grade low fat pork had passed customs in Japan, the Philippines, China and Solomon Islands at this point, and was a tasty way to obtain protein. The dinners, on the other hand, were home cooked, hot, fresh and delicious. As ordering dinners was a bit unusual at the guesthouse, it took some time to establish a price. In the end, I was asked a very reasonable SBD 70 (€7) for two dinners (with main course, dessert and squash). In fact, I shared what the family had for themselves. They did not need to cook specifically for me.



**Fig. 7.** One of the Moreno Rest House dinners, the main course: rice, vegetables and tuna.

On the first day, I did the short walk to the Tingoa 'CBD' to locate the village shop (on the right after the air field gate), to buy water and soft drinks (no alcohol in the shop). It was hot and humid in Rennell, around +32C, and the weather stayed calm and mostly sunny throughout the visit. On the second afternoon, we got some rain showers for three hours, but that did not really stop sweating. It was therefore important to drink a lot. As soon as I had emptied the water bottles, I filled them with water boiled in the kitchen, just like the Chinese guests did, adding some juice or tea for taste.

On the way to the village proper, I met the local police who were curious to know what had made me to visit the island. The police station is close to Moreno Rest House. Birdwatching proved to be a completely satisfactory explanation. Also on the forest track, one man asked where I was planning to go. 'Nowhere', I said, 'I am already where I need to be for birdwatching'. He had walked all the way from the westernmost village, Manggautu, and was curious to know if I was on my way there.

Overall, Rennell was distinctively Polynesian. Most of the people were friendly and welcoming. As a rule, the locals left me in peace and did not mind if I ventured a few steps into their private land. They greeted me and perhaps changed a word or two. They admired the bird photos I showed to them, the birds which could only be seen on Rennell. Some of them (mostly men) knew the birds, some (mostly women) had no idea that such creatures existed in the back of their homesteads.

Also the Chinese guests enjoyed the photos, even though my suggestion that part of the island should be left in peace was not supported. 'But people need to eat', was the reply. I wonder who those people in need were, the ones who demanded the clearcut of all the forest. They probably were in Hong Kong, I guess. So far, such unsustainable operations have no record of actually benefiting local communities.

On the other hand, some boys had to be discouraged to follow me. They had slingshots and not much entertainment at hand, and therefore periodically took pot shots on everything alive around them. In their age, I had behaved much the same way. I also had seen how they attached themselves to some friendlier visitors and decided to draw a clear line, to be able to focus on birding.

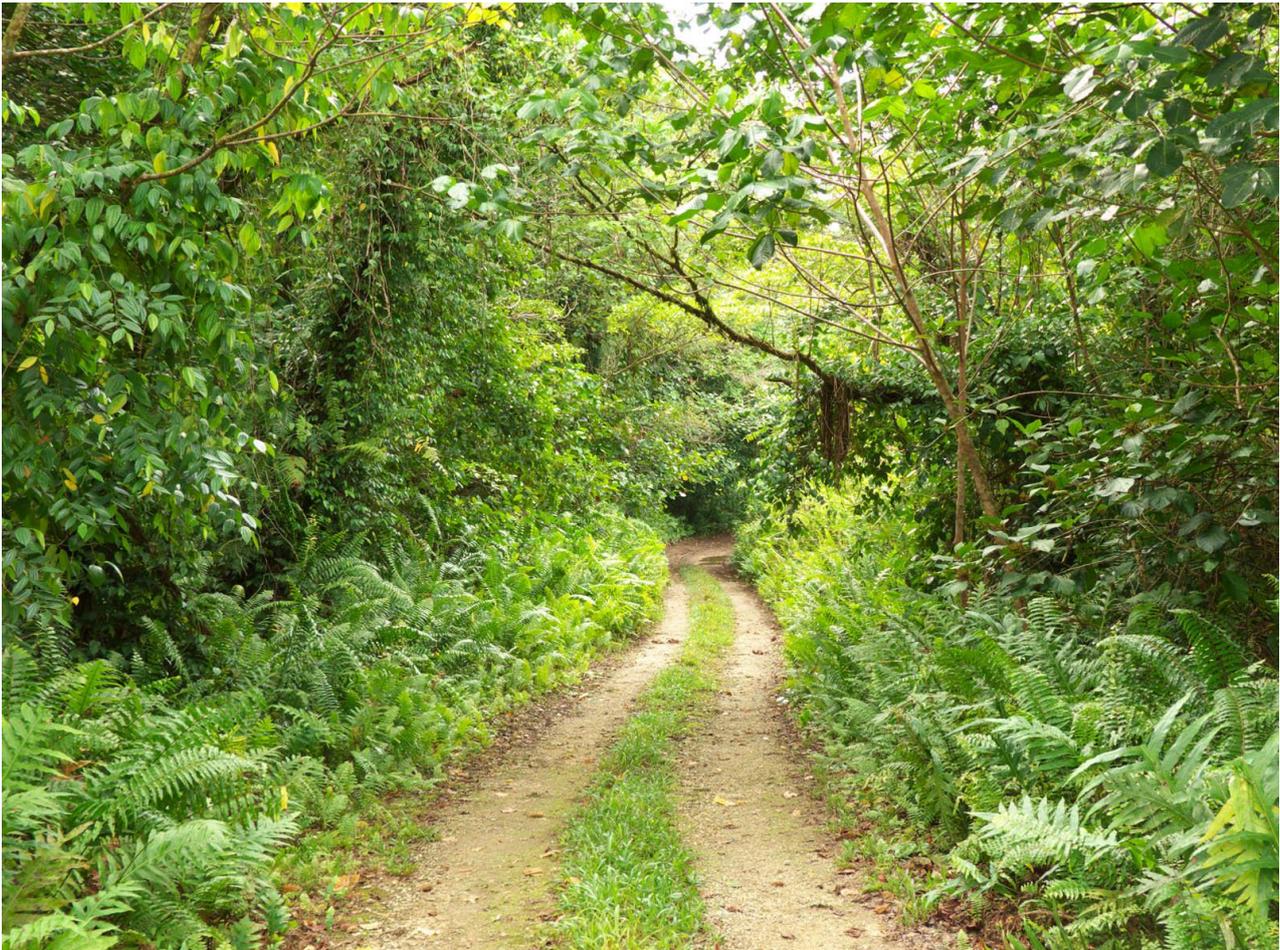


**Fig. 8.** A view from my balcony. The start of the air strip shows on the right, the large trees in the back held parrots and pigeons. For the forest, one turned left at the access road junction.

## **BIRDING**

As has already been implied, for forest birds, I normally took the forest track to Kangua, Manggautu and other settlements, and walked about one kilometer on it, before returning to Moreno Rest House. The track runs through the whole island, but the section which starts at the beginning of the landing strip seldom has any cars on it. I did not see any. People walk there, but they are very few, too. Along the first hundreds of meters, there are some homesteads and gardens. Later on, forest gardens and more dense sections of the forest will follow, with a variety of habitats and pronounced edge effect, favoring the observation of mixed species bird parties. The walks were done at sunrise and late in the afternoon.

In the middle of the day, I rested in my room or in the balcony, observing birds from the shade. Alternatively, the landing area was observed from the shadow of a large tree in the yard. In the evenings, I favored the same area, observing the birds crossing the airfield on their way between stretches of forest on either side. On two occasions, the walk to the shop on the first morning and waiting for the plane to arrive on the last, also the other end of the airfield and the village proper were surveyed. In the other direction, towards Lake Tenggano, I was told that the forest was already degraded in a major way. In regard to mammals, the only species recorded was **Tongan Fruit Bat** (Flying Fox). These massive bats were common, 10 to 20 recorded on each day, but not numerous.



**Fig. 9.** The level forest track, with a variety of habitats and hardly anybody else, except birds.

## THE BIRDS

**Great Cormorant:** A party of 11 flew across the island when I was waiting for the return flight.

**Australian White Ibis:** Around 10 individuals frequented the airfield and Tingoa village.

**Brown Goshawk:** One adult bird was regular at the airfield at dusk.

**Australian Swamphen:** Single adults were seen on two occasions at forest gardens.

**Pacific Golden Plover:** A party of 19 birds had decided to skip family life in Siberia and spend the summer at the Tingoa airfield lawn. Three of them were in full breeding plumage.

**White-rumped Swiftlet:** The common swiftlet in Rennell, up to one hundred at the airfield at dusk.

**Uniform Swiftlet:** Only one pair was recorded over the forest. Apparently more common at Lake Tenggano.

**Mackinlay's Cuckoo-Dove:** Very common (if judged by calls) and sometimes confiding in the forest.

**Pacific Imperial Pigeon:** Quite common and best seen in the canopy of large trees; e.g. from the Moreno Rest House.

**Silver-capped Fruit-Dove:** Subspecies *cyanopterus*. The Solomon Islands endemic was common and relatively easily located in fruiting trees.

**Singing Parrot:** Distinctive subspecies *hyacinthinus*. Particularly visible in tall trees opposite Moreno Rest House. Noisy and lively, and with better views in Rennell than in PNG or Guadalcanal, where the parrots are not as confiding.

**Finch's Pygmy-Parrot:** Probably common, but somewhat difficult to spot in the forest, because of their small size and thin voice. Three individuals gave stunning views along the forest track. Easier to observe at this peaceful site than at Mt. Austen, Guadalcanal, for example.



**Fig. 10.** Like some sort of fantasy creature, an elf or a gnome, a **Finch's Pygmy Parrot** studies me in the gloom of the forest. These tiny parrots (9 cm!) feed on tree trunks, often quite low above the ground.

**Melanesian Kingfisher:** Depending on taxonomy, either *Todiramphus chloris amoenus* or *tristrami amoenus*. Regular and tame at the forest track, and also seen at Moreno Rest House.

**Shining Bronze Cuckoo:** The resident subspecies is *harterti*. One pair occupied a territory in the beginning of the forest track and another one was heard calling at Moreno Rest House.

**Island Thrush:** Only one adult *rennellianus* was seen, once on the forest track. The taxonomy of the **Island Thrush** complex is intriguing, which such a variety of forms, some of them restricted to high mountains, whereas others live on the sea level. It is probably best to try to see all the subspecies, when available.

**Moustached Tree-Swift:** Four pairs were observed between the start and the end of the forest track.

**Cardinal Myzomela:** Rather common both in gardens and in the forest.

**Melanesian Flycatcher:** A party of two females/juveniles was encountered on a semi-open stretch of the forest trail on the first day. The local subspecies is *occidentalis*.

**Rennell Shrikebill:** Arguably the most handsome of the Rennell endemics. Readily attracted by recordings and therefore easy to photograph, as well. A total of 19 were observed, all of them along the forest track.

**Rennell Fantail:** Relatively uncommon. Only four individuals were recorded in the forest, along the track, each of them however with prolonged, close views.

**Fan-tailed Gerygone:** Quite common. Few dozen of these lively birds were seen on each day. The Rennell subspecies is *citrina*.

**Rennell Whistler:** The most difficult endemic to see well in Rennell, because of their habit to sing low in the shadows of the forest. On the first day, a single male was seen right by the forest track. In addition, I heard three other singing males. They breed in October-November and probably are more active then.

**Rennell White-eye:** Less common than the next species but nevertheless regularly encountered at forest edge, in lush thickets. The total number was, however, only about 20.

**Superciliated White-eye:** Very common but not really abundant. Seen also in more open habitats, such as roadside gardens. 50 to 135 individuals on each day.

**Barred Cuckooshrike:** A pair was seen at Moreno Rest House on the second day, and a single bird while waiting for the return flight. Subspecies *gracilis*.

**Singing Starling:** Seen at the Tingoa village and at Moreno Rest House. A total of only three individuals, a surprisingly low number!

**Rennell Starling:** Also only three birds; two flying over (heavy, big belly) the forest track, and one perched at Moreno Rest House. The second most difficult endemic to see well in Rennell.



**Fig. 11.** A male **Shining Bronze Cuckoo** of the endemic subspecies *harterti*, probably seldom photographed. The female had a buffy throat.



**Fig. 12.** A moment of intimacy in the afternoon sun: A **Rennell White-eye** pecks its mate on a cheek. Behind me, a small boy almost managed to shoot his slingshot, but I stopped him right on time.



**Fig. 13.** A topic of taxonomic debates: either a **Collared Kingfisher** of subspecies *amoenus*, or a **Melanesian Kingfisher** of the same subspecies. The taxonomy of kingfishers remains unsolved, with difficult decisions to be made especially in regard to the **Collared Kingfisher** complex.



**Fig. 14.** A **Silvery-capped Fruit-Dove**, a species endemic to only four (small) islands in the Solomons: Rennell, Bellona, Ugi and Santa Anna.



**Fig. 15.** There were many beautiful flowers along the forest track.

## CONCLUSIONS

Visiting Rennell Island for birdwatching has never been easier than it today is. Its endemic bird species are unique. It would also be important to monitor the developments on the island by field observations, and to show that there are people interested in its extraordinary wildlife. I would therefore like to encourage birdwatchers to do the journey. From Brisbane, for example, it is short flight to Guadalcanal, which is a great birdwatching destination by itself. From Honiara, Solomon Airlines flies to Rennell almost daily. Rennell certainly is something different, and one of the more pleasant destinations of Melanesia.



**Fig. 16.** Lager was not sold at the Tingoa village shop. Nevertheless, empty cans were everywhere! From where did the people obtain their beer, remained a mystery.