

**Cocos Keeling Islands and Christmas Island trip report Summer 2015-16.**  
**Birding Tours Australia – Richard Baxter**



Common Kingfisher- West Island- Cocos (Bernie O'Keefe)

It was with much excitement and anticipation that we gathered on Tuesday morning the 17<sup>th</sup> November 2015 for the first trip to Australia's Indian Ocean Territories of the 2015-16 migration season. Several migrants had been seen on both islands in recent days and the local endemics were ready to put on a great show.

We landed on a very dry CI, the driest I've seen the island since 2004. We were in the grip of the worst El Nino ever recorded, with news in the last couple of days that the current El Nino had broken the previous 1997 records. There was no chance of any monsoonal rain any time soon and it was going to be hard work to find any vagrants on Christmas Island. I was hoping that Cocos was far enough west to escape the El Nino influence and perhaps it would deliver the vagrants that had not made their way south to CI.

Our first afternoon was spent seeing some of the island's endemics. Some of our group were first timers to the island and for them the new birds came thick and fast. **Christmas Island Imperial Pigeon, Island Thrush, Glossy Swiftlet** and **CI White-eye** were all seen close to our motel. The only migrant seen on the first afternoon was a lone **ORIENTAL PRATINCOLE** which flew over our heads at Settlement.

Below: Christmas Island Imperial Pigeon (Richard Baxter)



On our second day we explored the coastal strip, seeing a lone **White-breasted Waterhen**, **Greater Christmas Island Frigatebirds** as well as **Brown and Red-footed Booby**. By lunchtime we had found three **ORIENTAL CUCKOO** and both **Red-tailed and White-tailed Tropicbird** as well as eight **Barn Swallow**. The birding highlight of the day came that afternoon on the Blowholes Track with a tail wagging **GREY WAGTAIL** showing well, prior to finishing the afternoon at North West Point watching several **Abbott's Booby** roosting and cruising the skies above.



Island Thrush (Richard Baxter)



Grey Wagtail (Bernie O'Keefe)

We were up early the next day in search of **Java Sparrow** and by 7.30am had found thirty as well as several **Tree Sparrows**. We visited The Dales but failed to find any migratory wetland species, although we were rewarded with two **YELLOW WAGTAIL** on the drive out.

The days continued to be dry with no sign of rain or the usual monsoonal build up at this time of year. Even the usually lush rainforest looked dry and in distress. The usual parade of Red Crabs across the island was absent, with barely a crab visible and all the island's roads and tracks were open to vehicles. Usually at this time of year many of the island's roads are closed for the migration. Whilst driving the rainforest tracks we had good views of the recently split **Common Emerald Dove** which all agreed is a much nicer bird than the mainland species. Common Emerald Dove (B.O'Keefe)



Late afternoon we found an obliging **Christmas Island (Brown) Goshawk** that was happy to sit and have its photo taken for fifteen minutes and along another track near the recreation centre we flushed a **JAPANESE SPARROWHAWK** from a tree near the road. Only those in the front car got brief flight views as it was escorted away by two of the resident Nankeen Kestrels. The remainder of the day was spent searching for the sparrowhawk without success.

Saturday was our optional boat trip along the protected CI coastline. During the day most people had a snorkel over the reef and one group swam with a pod of 25 Spinner Dolphins. In addition to these, the island's boobies, tropicbirds and frigatebirds were plentiful along the rugged coastline allowing the groups photographers to fill their memory cards. Below: Christmas Frigatebird (B.O'Keefe)



Brown Booby (Richard Baxter)



Red-footed Booby (Richard Baxter)

Over the next couple of days we returned to the sparrowhawk site several times and continued to scour the island for vagrants as well as returning to many of the sites we'd visited during the week giving the group's photographers much needed time to get that perfect shot. With a day to go we



concentrated our search efforts on locating Asian Koel. The koel is a species we rarely miss in Nov but one that we rarely ever find in Feb/March. Two people on the tour had been on my February trip only nine months previously and the Koel, Yellow and Grey Wagtails were at the top of their most wanted lists. So far we'd seen 2/3.

There are several sites on the island to find the koel, so we split up early the next morning with groups going to each site. It wasn't long before Damian's group had found a pair near Flying Fish Cove. We converged on the site but they weren't being as cooperative as we would have liked. Some years they sit out in the open and eat wild ripe Paw Paw in front of our group and other years they're cryptic and difficult to see in the large rainforest trees. This was one of those years. It took a few hours but eventually everyone had reasonable views of a pair of **ASIAN KOEL**.



Asian Koel (Bernie O'Keefe)

Considering the extreme dry weather we had great views of the island's endemics as well as a nice haul of six vagrants, which was more than I had predicted. With **Grey and Yellow Wagtail**, **Oriental Cuckoo**, **Japanese Sparrowhawk**, **Oriental Pratincole** and **Asian Koel** in the bag we were a pretty satisfied group that headed off to Cocos for a week.

Our first morning was spent on West Island where we found **CHINESE POND HERON** on the runway and **COMMON REDSHANK** near the garbage tip. That afternoon we caught the ferry to Home Island and had great views of **BLUE AND WHITE FLYCATCHER**. Added to these were **Green Junglefowl** and **White-breasted Waterhen**, combining to make a great first days haul.

Our second day was spent on West Island and what a great day it was. An early start at the wetlands produced both **COMMON MOORHEN** and **COMMON TEAL** before breakfast. After breakfast we headed off in search of the days main target, Common Kingfisher. Our group split up and searched two locations, one along the beach and another along the inner lagoon. Nigel and Anne Harland were first to find the bird 50m along the beach sitting in an overhanging Calophyllum tree and catching fish in the rock pools below. Our group gathered at the site and soon we had all seen a

cracking little **COMMON KINGFISHER**. The bird was particularly good for Tania as it was her 800<sup>th</sup> Australian bird. Below: Chinese Pond Heron (Richard Baxter) Blue & White Flycatcher (Damian Baxter)



Later that day a walk along the inner lagoon at low tide revealed two **WESTERN REEF EGRETS** and another **Common Redshank**. Our final mega of the day came late in the afternoon when we flushed a **HODGSON'S HAWK CUCKOO** which conveniently flew in front of the car.

After a great day of sightings we headed over to Home Island on Friday in search of more vagrants. This day turned out to be very frustrating with only brief glimpses of birds and several missed opportunities. It started at the carpark near the jetty when Damian walked over to a nearby pool of water and flushed what was probably a Schrenck's Bittern. Despite repeated visits to the area it was not seen again. On Home Island we had a small sparrowhawk flush from a tree but it also was not seen again and our views were too brief to confirm the ID. Next came brief flight views of a **Hodgson's Hawk Cuckoo** and poor views of an **Oriental Cuckoo**. We spent three hours late in the afternoon unsuccessfully searching for a Slaty-breasted Rail which had been photographed two days previously by another birder not in our group. Below: White-breasted Waterhen & Green Junglefowl (B.O'Keefe)



After a frustrating Friday, the next day was to reveal the bird of the trip. Saturday morning started with another unrewarding search for the rail, prior to catching the ferry to Home Island. Whilst driving along the edge of the park we found three **Yellow Wagtail** and again had nice views of **White Tern** and **White-tailed Tropicbird**. Whilst walking the coast road Fred and Heather Allsopp heard a bird calling in the coastal Argusia and upon investigating flushed a small flycatcher into a nearby tree. We quickly surrounded the tree and before long our entire group had great views of a young **NARCISSUS FLYCATCHER**. This bird instantly became the bird of the trip as it had only ever been recorded in Australia once before by workers on Barrow Island and no birders had ever seen this species in Australia. Our group took lots of photos of this co-operative mega.





Above: Narcissus Flycatcher (Fred Allsopp)

After a busy week our group had an easy Sunday which mainly included an outrigger canoe trip to South Island. We moored our canoes on the edge of the lagoon and after a short walk found nine **SAUNDERS'S TERN** on a nearby sandbar. The remainder of the day was spent having lunch on a remote lagoon beach and swimming in the shallow lagoon waters, prior to finishing the day with a nice walk around town where we saw **Hodgson's Hawk Cuckoo** and **Oriental Cuckoo**.

Our final full day on the atoll was also productive. We spent the morning on Home Island where we found a second **Narcissus Flycatcher**, this time in the mansion grounds and then spent some quality time at the West Island wetlands getting healthier views of the moorhen and teal, prior to a great final night beach dinner where we celebrated several birding milestones reached by members of the group.

News of our finds over the last fortnight had spread to the mainland and when I arrived at the Cocos Airport a couple of days later to pick up the next group for my December tour there were several very excited birders disembarking the flight ready to hit the ground running.



White Tern & Robber Crab (Bernie O'Keefe)

Our first morning was spent touring West Island where we found **Masked Booby**, **WESTERN REEF EGRET**, **CHINESE POND HERON**, **White tern**, **ORIENTAL CUCKOO** and **White-breasted Waterhen**. The afternoon was spent looking at some of the island's more 'common' visitors, such as **COMMON MOORHEN**, **COMMON REDSHANK**, **COMMON KINGFISHER**, **COMMON TEAL** and Common Sandpiper.

Below: Common (Eurasian) Teal (Bernie O'Keefe)



Below: Common Moorhen. (Bernie O'Keefe)





After spending Sunday on South Island seeing nine **Saunders's Tern** we once again caught the ferry to Home Island on Monday morning. This was to be the most exciting day of trip with everyone seeing at least one new bird. Bill and Jack Moorhead had been to Home Island the day before with Geof Christie and a local had shown them an unusual bird near the tennis courts. Described as all black, they thought it would be just a male Asian Koel but after a short search had photographed Australia's first ever Crow-billed Drongo. This was our days target and before long our entire group had seen a fairly confiding **CROW-BILLED DRONGO** in the Calophyllum trees near the tennis courts.



Crow-billed Drongo (David Fonda)

With the drongo in the bag it was time for a short walk back to Oceania House. We assembled at the entrance and the air was full of the smell of vagrants. A loop around the grounds soon had us surrounding a tree with a small passerine in the canopy. We initially thought it was another flycatcher but it soon revealed itself as a very cryptic phylloscopus warbler. We narrowed it down to either Arctic or Kamchatka but the way it responded to playback confirmed it as the first **ARCTIC WARBLER** for Cocos. After lunch we continued searching the grounds and soon Biggles had found another small passerine in a tree, this time another **Narcissus Flycatcher**. It was an awesome days birding, with three spectacular rarities, all seen by the entire group.





Above: Narcissus or possible Green-backed Flycatcher (Bill Moorhead)



Above: Narcissus or possible Green-backed Flycatcher (Fred Allsopp)

With a mouth-watering suite of vagrants already seen in just three days there was no time to rest on our laurels as we still had plenty to target. On Tuesday our target birds were Grey Wagtail, which had been hanging around the West Island wetlands and Oriental Cuckoo. We spent the morning on Home Island where we had two flight views of **Oriental Cuckoo** as well as fifty **White Terns** and a circling **White-tailed Tropicbird**. After lunch we visited the wetlands where up until now only a few of us had seen the wagtail but after an hour or so of waiting the **GREY WAGTAIL** flew in and we all had good views.

Over the next two days we continued to explore the islands. We visited Horsburgh Island and went snorkelling on Direction Island as well as spent the afternoon on Home Island and dined at the local Malay restaurant, returning on the 8.30pm ferry. We relocated many of the good birds we'd seen in recent days as well as finally seeing and photographing **PIN-TAILED SNIPE** on West Island and **WESTERN REEF EGRET** in the inner lagoon.



Pin-tailed Snipe (B.O'Keefe)



Staking out the Narcissus Flycatcher and Arctic Warbler (R.Baxter)

An extraordinary sighting was had by the few of us that visited Horsburgh Island. There are several pairs of the usually secretive and difficult to see Cocos Buff-banded Rail (*Gallirallus philippensis andrewsi*) on the island and at best we sometimes flush them or see them scurrying through the long grass but on this day two wandered out onto the beach as we were landing and then proceeded to feed on the adjacent rock platform. A quick sneak up the beach and we had some exceptional photographs of this often difficult to connect with sub-species. Photo Below: (B.O'Keefe)





Once again it was time to head over to South Island for **Saunders's Tern** and on the way over we saw **Lesser Frigatebird** and **Red-footed Booby** patrolling the lagoon. While our hosts prepared our lunch on a remote beach we headed off towards the last few remaining sandbars ahead of the incoming tide. We walked across the shallow lagoon waters and set ourselves up nicely from where we enjoyed superb views of this highly sought-after species prior to a relaxing swim and lunch under the palm trees. What a great way to end another fabulous day. Photo below: Saunders's Tern (B.O'Keefe)



It was our last full day on the island and we'd seen all of our target species as well as a bunch of stellar rarities but there was still one surprise to come. We'd decided our best chance of finding another special bird was to head back to Home Island, so we were back on the early ferry and heading into the mansion grounds one last time. Our morning was productive finding an **ASIAN KOEL** and **Lesser Frigatebirds**. We headed over to the supermarket for some cool drinks and the odd ice block prior to walking the other end of the island. When we arrived at the supermarket, there was a message from Geof Christie on West Island, "get back to West Island there's another vagrant flycatcher"!

Luckily we were in time to catch the 11.30am ferry and we were soon back on West Island. A quick look at the back of Geof's camera and he'd photographed a Mugimaki Flycatcher near Trannies Beach. We were quickly there and then began the search for the bird that had only ever been seen in Australia once before. A rather worrisome hour passed and nothing yet, but we did enjoy close views of **White Tern** and then it happened, Bernie O'Keefe saw a small passerine move in the top of one of the beachside trees. Within minutes we marvelled at a stunning **MUGIMAKI FLYCATCHER** and were all treated to superb views of this absolute mega! A fitting end to what had been another memorable time on Cocos.

The following day we flew to Christmas Island for the second half of the trip.



Above: Mugimaki Flycatcher (Richard Baxter)

The first two days on Christmas Island we enjoyed some great birds, picking up **Island Thrush**, **Christmas Island Imperial Pigeon**, **Glossy Swiftlet** and the local **Brown Goshawk**. A real feature of the island is the stunning and rugged coastline, which is constantly patrolled by the subtly pretty **White-tailed Tropicbird** and the dazzling golden morph of the same species, along with the distinctive **Abbott's Booby**. Nice views were also had of both **Christmas Island and Great Frigatebird** as well as both **Brown and Red-footed Booby**.



Glossy Swiftlet (Bernie O'Keefe)



During a number of drives in the forest we managed to get views of **Common Emerald Dove**, **Red Junglefowl** and **Christmas Island White-eye**. A brief stop at South Point Temple yielded a **HOUSE SWIFT** which glided past our group as we scanned the ocean below.

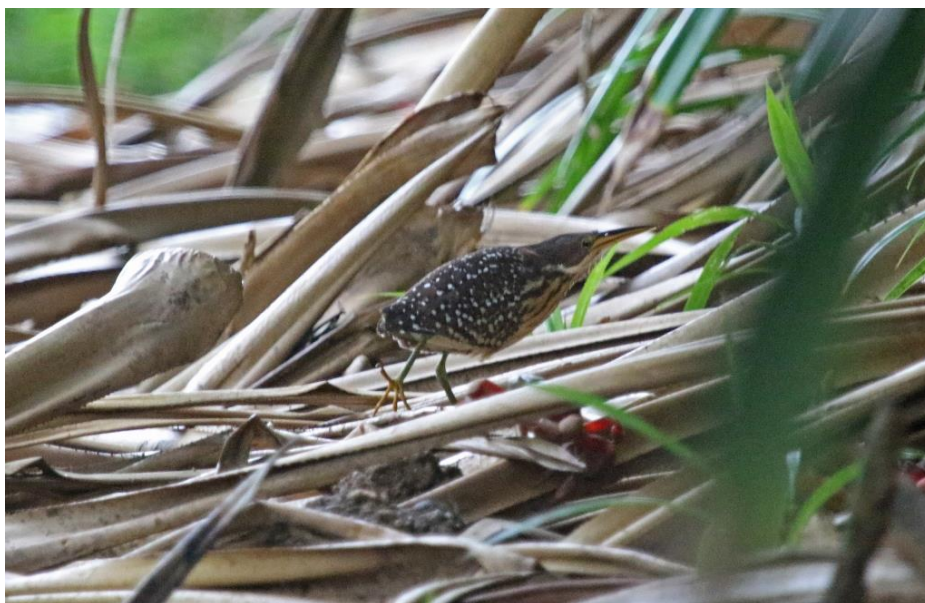
We spent an unsuccessful couple of hours at the end of the airport runway and the golf course looking for vagrant nightjars but were fittingly compensated later with views of perhaps the island's most impressive endemic, the **Christmas Boobook** aka **Christmas Island Hawk Owl**. A short drive through the rainforest after dinner had us in a clearing with two birds calling. A quick search and we had both birds in the same tree allowing wonderful views. A fitting end to a great day.



Photo: Christmas Boobook X 2 (B.O'Keefe)

The highlight of our week on Christmas Island came when we were walking through the grass near the casino. We'd spread out and were hoping to flush something from the grass but it had been unproductive. As we lingered in the area Biggles walked past an area of reeds near the stream and flushed a small bittern. We decided to leave the site alone for a while and return later. A short stake out and there it was, a fantastic **VON SCHRENCK'S BITTERN**, seen well by the entire group.

Photo Below: Schrenck's Bittern (Richard Baxter)



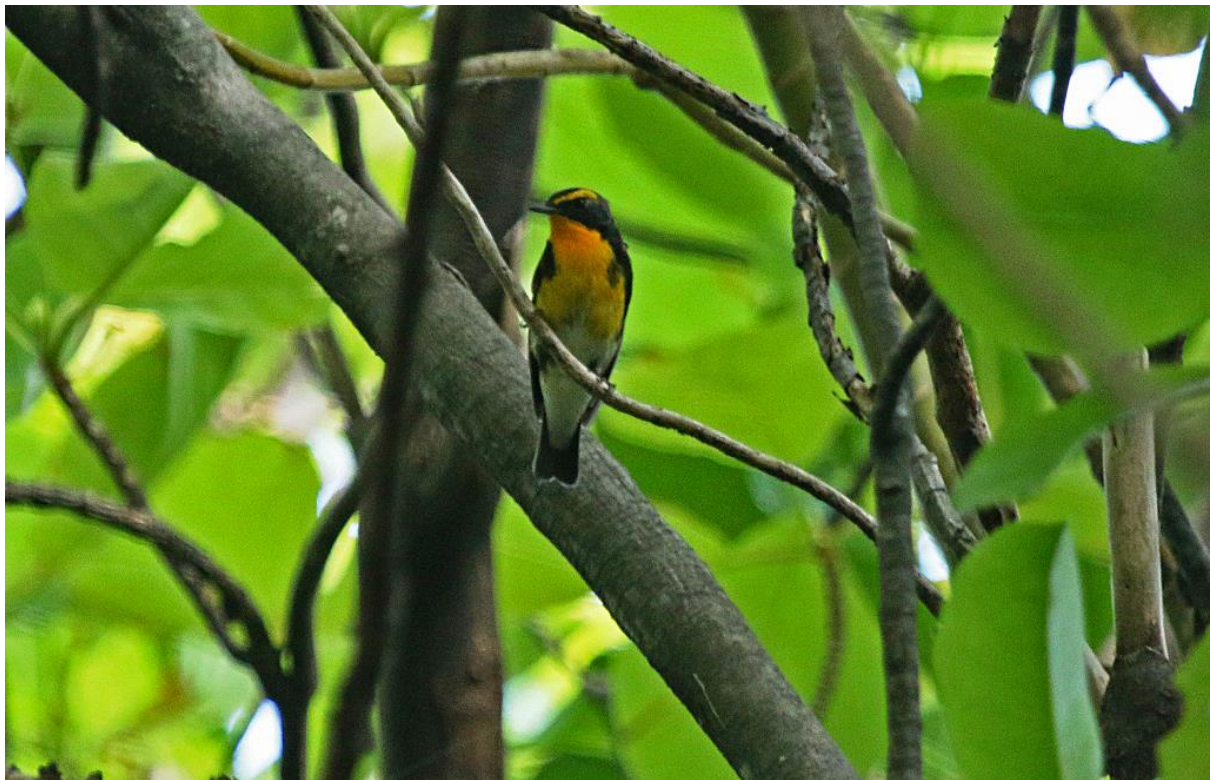
The bittern stayed at the site for the next three days and some of the group spent some quality time at the site watching this much sort after species from the car parked across the road as it fed and moved around in the stream.

With two days remaining we had seen all the island's endemics and specialties, although surprisingly it had taken us four days to find **Red-tailed Tropicbird** and a similar time to find **Java Sparrow**. We found our last vagrant on the second last day when we located two **YELLOW WAGTAILS** on one of the old electricity tracks.

A fitting end to what had been another excellent tour.

Our next tour was due to start in mid-February and one of the distinct advantages of the Feb-March tours to the islands is the birds have often started to move into their breeding plumage and colour up nicely. In the case of species like pond herons and wagtails, this assists greatly with identification.

By the time our February tour had begun both islands had finally experienced decent rainfall. Our fortnight began on Cocos and in the three weeks since our December tour ended one very special bird had arrived on the islands, a male Narcissus Flycatcher in near full adult plumage, a truly cracking bird and considering its moult timing, not one of the birds we'd seen earlier in the season.



Narcissus Flycatcher (Richard Baxter)

Not long after arriving on the island we were in the cars and heading to the site where the flycatcher had been seen, passing on the way **White-breasted Waterhen** with chicks and **Green Junglefowl**. We spent most of the afternoon at the site with no sign of the flycatcher but we did have nice views of roosting **White Tern**.



The following day we again dipped on the flycatcher but had a nice day visiting most of the island's main birding locations. We enjoyed some great birds, picking up a distinctive **Oriental Pratincole** in breeding plumage, **Pacific Golden Plover**, **White-tailed Tropicbird**, **Lesser Frigatebird**, **Red-footed Booby**, **Masked Booby**, **Grey Plover**, **Pomerine Jaeger** and **Barn Swallow**.

We visited the inner lagoon seeing **Nankeen Night Heron** and **WESTERN REEF EGRET** and also spent a fair amount of time at the wetlands looking for the Common Moorhen we'd seen in Nov/Dec. There was no sign of the moorhen but we did have nice views of the long staying **COMMON (EURASIAN) TEAL**.

As a final late afternoon activity we drove to the lagoon end of the runway, parked and walked along the track towards the water. Fifty meters in front of us two **WATERCOCK** flushed from the long grass, disappearing into nearby bushes. Only a few of us had seen them, so the next afternoon we parked and snuck around the side of the lagoon using the coastal scrub as cover and exiting right where the Watercock had flushed from the previous afternoon. The plan worked perfectly as both birds flushed near us with one individual circling back around behind us providing everyone with superb views of this cagey migratory skulker.



Above: Watercock (Richard Baxter)

The following morning we cruised over to South Island where we found thirteen **SAUNDERS'S TERN** showing well, roosting and flying within the inner lagoon. We visited Home Island and despite a methodical search of the mansion grounds failed to find anything particularly interesting. We turned our attention to the local farm and after a short walk soon flushed several **PIN-TAILED SNIPE**. We would continue to see these at a few other locations during the rest of the week.

The next morning we began the day searching for the flycatcher and this time had some success. It was heard singing deep in the coastal forest and at times would move just enough for some of us to glimpse it. Frustratingly it disappeared but we would be back for better views the next day.

The highlight of the day came just before lunch. We'd walked an area on the far side of the runway near the golf course and were heading back to the cars just as it started to rain. I walked around a large bush and in front of me flushed a **CINNAMON BITTERN** from the ground. It disappeared into a large strand of Argusia and unfortunately I was the only one to see it. The following day we returned to the site, parked our vehicles out of view and walked the area. Right on cue the bittern flushed in front of the group and once again disappeared into the Argusia bushes. Needless to say, the photographic opportunities weren't fabulous but it did flush from only a few feet in front of us and what a great bird to see in Australia.



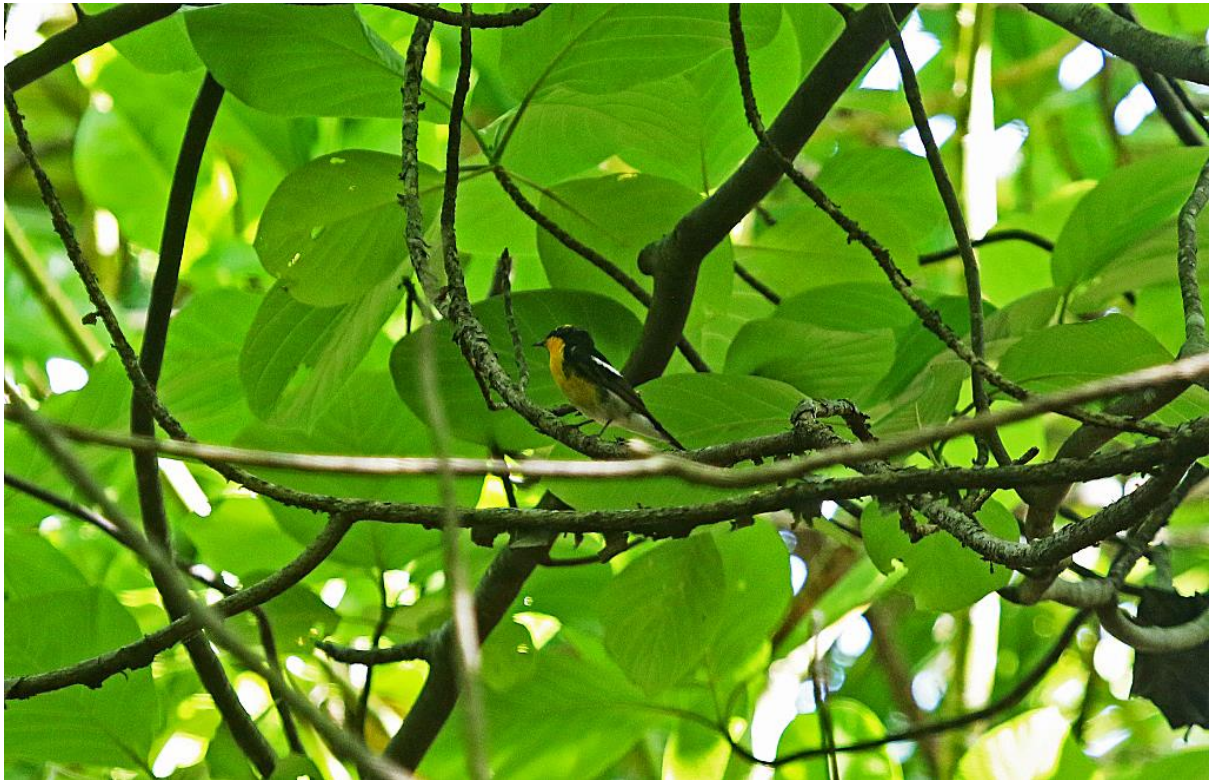
Above: Cinnamon Bittern (Geof Christie)



Above: White-breasted Waterhen (Richard Baxter)



The next morning we easily located the Narcissus Flycatcher and had time to really enjoy it singing in front of us. After the last couple of days searching, we were a very relieved and happy group. This was truly one of the most astonishing and spectacular birds we'd ever found on the islands.



We finished the week off with a relaxed beach dinner prior to heading off to Christmas Island.

The wet season had finally arrived on the island and although it wasn't as wet as it has been in previous years it was still a nice change from the parched conditions we experienced in November & December. The forest was looking greener and there were even a few puddles around the island to attract the birds. The Red Crabs were more active and some of the islands breeding seabirds were beginning to collect nesting material. Below: Red Crab migration (Richard Baxter)







Above: Some much needed wet season rain on Christmas Island (Richard Baxter)

Our first afternoon began with a short walk around settlement near our accommodation which being on the northern side of the island is a good place to find vagrants. There were no vagrants on our first afternoon but we did connect with **Island Thrush**, **Christmas Island Imperial Pigeon**, **Christmas Island White-eye**, **Glossy Swiftlet** and **Tree Sparrow**. Some of us had brief views of Java Sparrow in a local yard but they flushed before the rest of our group arrived to see them. We were compensated three days later when we found a flock of 29 **Java Sparrows** at the same location.

The next morning began with a walk around the garbage tip where we had distant views of the local race of **Brown Goshawk** as well as three **Barn Swallow** and **Common Emerald Dove**. After breakfast we photographed a **RED-LEGGED CRAKE** near the casino, which swiftly disappeared into the undergrowth, never to be seen again.







Above: Red-legged Crake (Richard Baxter)

Over the next week we covered just about the entire island, including a few of the long forest drives we weren't able to do in Nov/Dec. We walked to The Dales, visited Martin Point, spent many hours in the rainforest, had nice views of **Christmas Boobook** and spent half a day exploring the island's protected coastline by boat.

During our travels we saw a couple of nice **Red Junglefowl** and were surprised by the number of **Striated Heron** we found. These were the race *B. s. javanicus* which breeds throughout SE Asia and the Greater Sundas just to the north of CI. With white stripes on the face, throat and neck this race is very different to the Australian mainland races.

An Intermediate Egret on the golf course with a black bill tip was a good candidate for a vagrant of the nominate Asian subspecies *A. i. intermedi*, which has recently been given full species status by Birdlife and separated from the Australian Plumed Egret.



Above: Striated Heron- Probable race Javanicus. (Richard Baxter)



Above: Christmas Island coast and Brown Booby chick (Richard Baxter)

No matter where we went on the island there was the constant presence of the resident seabirds either soaring above the plateau, patrolling the sea cliffs, collecting nesting material or sitting in trees and on cliffs. The island is certainly one of the best places in the world to see these species and most are abundant. There are 8000 **Great Frigatebirds**, 17000 **Brown Booby**, 28000 **Red-footed Booby**, 3000 **CI Frigatebirds**, 25000 **White-tailed Tropicbirds**, 3000 **Red-tailed Tropicbirds** and 5000 rare and endangered **Abbott's Booby**. All these, coupled with the local endemics found nowhere else in Australia made for a wonderful time birding.

The February tour was our final trip to the islands for the 2015-16 season. Prior to the start of the season I was a tad worried about the effects of the El Nino on the migratory species and although we did find some fantastic birds on Christmas Island, such as Von Schrenck's Bittern and Red-legged Crake, the island was far drier and the migratory species far fewer than in previous years. Where Christmas Island was lacking this year, Cocos compensated with an unforgettable list of prized avian rarities. The islands are far enough west to have escaped the main influence of El Nino and being situated on the edge of both the East Asian/Australian and Central Asian flyways unquestionably helped contribute to this seasons bounty of highly sought-after species.

Despite seeing so many wonderful birds such as Common Kingfisher, Common Moorhen, Crow-billed Drongo, Arctic Warbler, Mugimaki Flycatcher, Chinese Pond Heron, Hodgson's Hawk Cuckoo and Blue & White Flycatcher, this season will be remembered for several exceptional sightings of Narcissus Flycatcher, with the undoubted highlight being the adult plumaged male seen in February.

Thank you very much to all the wonderful participants who helped make these such thoroughly rewarding tours. I am greatly looking forward to sharing many more exciting adventures with all of you.

**Cheers**

**Richard Baxter**

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