

Mauritius Birding

We went to Mauritius to decompress after two weeks in Madagascar. Mauritius is a cross between Hawaii and Switzerland. It's probably the best run country in Africa, you can even drink the tap water. We were wiped so birding was limited except for whatever wandered to the pool of our rental villa. I did insist on trying for the Pink Pigeons of Mauritius. Here's the play by play as narrated by my son, Chris:

So, when I was a kid, my favorite author (uncontested) was Gerald Durrell. His tales of adventure and misadventure as a collector of exotic beasts for zoos contributed substantially to my love of nature. Among his best books was "Golden Bats and Pink Pigeons", a tale of a collecting trip to the isle of Mauritius.

The Pink Pigeon was, at one point, among the rarest birds on earth. The species got down to a population of less than a dozen, and were among the first species ever trapped "to extinction" in the wild, in order to stage a captive breeding program for conservation. This was a success and the bird was re-introduced to The wild a couple decades ago.

Which led to today's scheduled activity. I may have mentioned that my father is a crazy birder, so he conned us into going in search of the elusive pink pigeons. I

dropped “Rivière Noire Gorges National Park” into Google Maps, and off we went. Well, almost. Mauritius is a former British colony, so they drive on the wrong side of the road. Thus, six of us piled into a subcompact that only an incurable optimist could call a “7 passenger van”, and we set off carefully to drive the five miles to the park.

As I drove, exclamations of “Left side!” and “Look out!” intermittently erupted from the back seat, but my favorite was “Pay attention!” You see, my mother couldn’t bring herself to watch the road for fear of what oncoming traffic might materialize, so she just sat in the back, staring down at her feet, and blurting “Pay attention!” whenever she detected a change in the direction or velocity of the vehicle.

Meanwhile, Grandpa was sitting in shotgun, supposedly navigating. Conveniently, he was 100% redundant with Google Maps on my iPhone, because he didn’t really say anything until we got halfway there. “This road is a dead end. We are going to the wrong end of the park.”

The road in question was a one lane road through dense forest, posted speed limit 60 kph. I had already spent ten terrifying minutes expecting my cause of death to be recorded in the police report as “Reduced to debris by an oncoming taxi, because he dodged the wrong way. Dumb American tourist.” So I felt strongly committed to the current road, and was not about to turn around to go find another entrance to the park.

So we rode for another ten minutes up the road, with Dad darkly muttering under his breath about how we were going to the wrong end of the park, and Mom randomly blurting “Pay attention!” from the back seat.

Somehow we made it to the park gate, where there was a ranger booth, as well as some evidence that a ranger had recently occupied the booth (a book placed open on the shelf to keep the page, and a cup of tea), but no sign of the ranger. The back seat consensus was that we should move on, so I did.

We parked in the last available spot in the visitor center parking lot (out of roughly a dozen), and hopped out of the car. To ease my frazzled nerves after the drive, I grabbed my camera and quickly walked toward the visitor center. I never made it, because there, in the path between the parking lot and the visitor center, right next to the toilets that were being used by a bus load of East Indian tourists, sat a Pink Pigeon. I blinked twice to be sure it was real, then flung an arm out to stop my oldest son as he blithely tried to walk past me. Through gritted teeth, I hissed “Stop! THAT is the bird Grandpa wants to see!”

Okay, in nearly fifty years of birding with my father, this has never happened before. We went in search of a target bird, and the darn thing was waiting for us at the visitor center. It wasn't just one, either. There were a half dozen of these things sitting on the roof of the visitor center, some staring blankly at us (as pigeons are wont to do),

others wooing one another or just pooping on the building (as pigeons are also wont to do).

So, here is a picture of the surviving members from the Great Pink Pigeon Expedition of 2019, along with a couple Pink Pigeons perched on the roof above them.





We also tried for the Mauritius Kestrel at Fernley Valley, but missed the noon feeding which is your only good chance of seeing the birds. Otherwise it was all imports except for common Mauritius Gray White-eyes.