

Micronesia April 2017

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This report (belatedly) covers a trip my wife Susan and I made in April 2017 through Micronesia. You don't need a bird guide on any of the islands; the main cost advantage to having a larger group is in cutting the cost of boat trips. As we were only two, we limited ourselves to one trip on Chuuk and one on Palau.

As usual we made use of trip reports on Cloudbirders, although there are not so many for this area, and had a few recordings from xeno-canto. We made very little effort on non-endemics.

Flights

You have to use United Airlines, which has inherited the routes of the old Air Mike. Most bird trips seem to go west to east, but after mapping out possible itineraries in both directions, it seemed that east-west was preferable, as it involved fewer middle of the night flights around Yap and Palau. We included Kosrae which most trips do not, as it now is considered to have a couple endemics of its own.

Our flight schedule was :

Honolulu-Kosrae	7:25AM-1:12PM April 3 arrive April 4 due to date line
Kosrae-Pohnpei	1:47PM-2:50PM April 8
Pohnpei-Chuuk	3:31PM-3:43PM April 11
Chuuk-Saipan	4:05PM-9:20PM April 13 (3 hr layover in Guam)
Saipan-Rota	1:30PM-2:05PM April 16
Rota-Yap	1:15PM-12:40AM April 18 (8 hr layover in Guam)
Yap-Palau	11:04PM-11:05PM April 22
Palau-Tokyo	3:20AM April 26

This gave us about the right amount of time in each island, except too much time in Kosrae. United partially solved that for us by canceling the first flight and flying us out a day later.

The cost of the above tickets was \$1886.00 each, purchased on United's website. We bought the tickets in two chunks, Hawaii to Saipan and Saipan to Palau, as this came out much cheaper than buying one leg at a time. (The United website would not support buying the whole thing as one big ticket.) Of course we had to get to Hawaii and get home from Palau as well. We flew from Florida to Hawaii on Delta, and spent a week there seeing most of the endemics on Kauai, Maui, and Oahu. We used Delta Frequent Flyer miles Palau-Tokyo (Wednesday only, but that worked out OK) and a Celebrity cruise from Tokyo to Vancouver after 12 days in Japan. (Definitely a retired person's trip).

We also did a day trip Saipan – Tinian which we booked on Saipan a day ahead on Star Micronesia.

Car Hire

(Note that most of the cars on these islands are used vehicles from Japan with steering wheel on the right since Japan drives on the left, but in all of the islands driving is on the right like in the US. So, you're sitting on the wrong side of the car.) Car hire was always very casual, without a big list of hidden extra charges and insurances to decline.

Pohnpei From Yvonne's Hotel, a late model SUV for \$65/day.

Saipan, Tinian, and Rota: Islander Rent-a-car at the three airports (\$50/day, \$45 on Tinian.)

Yap one day from 7D Rent-a-car (ESA Hotel has cars but was out. 7D was a short walk.) \$35/day I think

Palau from our Airbnb host, her car for \$25/day.

We did not hire a car in Kosrae or Chuuk.

Hotels

Kosrae: Pacific Treelodge Resort \$120/night. Nice restaurant/bar overlooking a lagoon. They didn't charge us for the night we missed due to United canceling our flight.

Pohnpei: Yvonne's Hotel. \$85/night. They provide airport transfers and had a car for us. Coin laundry on site. Restaurant was OK, but if you have a car you can drive to other places. The room has a kitchen but pretty minimal cookware.

Chuuk; Blue Lagoon Resort. Mainly for divers, as there are hundreds of WW II wrecks around. Gorgeous grounds, OK snorkeling right from the hotel. Very nice restaurant. The dive shop can arrange boats for birders.

Saipan: Serenti Hotel \$112/night. Plenty of choices here. An Airbnb would probably have worked out better. Plenty of restaurants in the area.

Rota: Hotel Valentino in SongSong \$68/night.

Yap: Hotel ESA. \$83/night, plus \$44 for late checkout before the 11PM Palau flight (well worth it)

Palau: an Airbnb rental in Arai (near the airport) \$68/night with car available \$25/day. Wouldn't work if you didn't have a car, as it's 25 minutes into town. Well-equipped kitchen so easy to self-cater here. There are several bedrooms which share the kitchen and bath, so would work well for a larger birder crew. (We had the whole place to ourselves for the 4 nights.) Jane picks you up at the airport, and we drove our rental to the airport when we left. A number of endemics in the yard.

Food

Limited as almost everything is imported. Lots of restaurants on Saipan, a few choices elsewhere. We had superb and reasonably priced tuna sashimi throughout.

Day by day

April 3 A long wasted day, as our United flight was canceled. Fortunately, we had four nights at our first destination Kosrae, due to infrequent flights. With only two endemics, it was the place we could most easily afford to lose a day.

April 4 We walked from our hotel to the airport, as the shuttle was a little backed up with a plane full of passengers from yesterday's canceled flight. We promptly lost another day crossing the date line.

April 5 We got off the plane for a few minutes in Majuro and filled in our Marshall Is list: Pacific Golden Plover. There are no endemics in the Marshall Is. Another stop in Kwajalien, then arrival in Kosrae, where we were driven to the very nice Pacific Treelodge. We saw our first endemics, the widespread **Micronesian Myzomela** and **Micronesian Starling**. Wandering Tattlers and Pacific Reef Herons (about equally light and dark) were common.

April 6 We found **Kosrae White-eye** along the boardwalk through the mangroves to Bully's Restaurant. White Terms entertained us during breakfast. A while later we ran into a part-time guide for the lodge named Carlos who was familiar with the birds of Kosrae (in fact, he provided the documentation for several first Kosrae records in Pratt's survey of the birds of the island.) Carlos said the **Kosrae Fruit-dove** was common on the road to his house. He drove us to the area after lunch, where we heard several and got several good flight views. This was followed by a fly over **Long-tailed Koel**, a bird we missed in New Zealand. The road was behind the mangroves across the lagoon from Bully's Restaurant (it is not visible from the restaurant), and is reached by going south 1/2 mile from the resort, bearing right across the bridge and then turning right on the dirt track. Continue past most of the houses to where the road narrows and forest begins. (About 20 minutes walk from hotel.)

We took a nice sunset cruise from the lodge where the free beer and very good fried fish and sushi easily justified the \$15 charge. Unfortunately no sunset.

April 7 With no birds to look for, we went snorkeling and sunburnt our backs pretty well despite the overcast skies. Snorkelling was good but not great – considerable bleaching. In the afternoon we saw our first two **Caroline Island Swiftlets**.

April 8 We went with Carlos to a swiftlet cave a few miles up the road, affording nice close-up views of nesting birds. In the afternoon, after paying the first of many departure taxes, we flew to Pohnpei, where Yvonne's Hotel picked us up. We got our rental car from Yvonne's, picked up some stuff for breakfast and lunch, and drove back to the airport to see the introduced (from New Ireland!) **Hunstein's Munia**, plus some Ruddy Turnstones and the ubiquitous Pacific Golden Plover. We saw a few **Pohnpei Lorikeets** from the hotel. OK dinner at hotel restaurant.

April 9 After breakfast we drove to Sokeh's ridge (only a few miles from the hotel). You can drive about half way up to a hairpin left where there is some space to park. From there it's about a mile walk to the end. Before this turn we had several **Micronesian Imperial Pigeons**. The last half mile, level on top of the ridge, was best for birds. In addition to more lorikeets and swiftlets we had **Long-billed, Citrine**, and **Gray-brown White-eye**, **Pohnpei Kingfisher**, **Pohnpei Fantail**, and **Purple-crowned Fruit-dove** (mainly heard, but a couple perched views).

We returned to the hotel for lunch, then went to Lududiniap falls. There wasn't much at the actual falls, which was pretty crowded and noisy on a sunny Sunday afternoon. However, on the road past the Falls to the tiny reservoir, we were lucky enough to find a single male **Pohnpei Cicadabird**. But no luck with the Flycatcher. Nice dinner at Ocean View restaurant.

April 10 Woke to a rainy day. We went back to Lududiniap falls area, going straight rather than turning left for the falls and reservoir. A few hundred yards down this road we quickly found four **Pohnpei Flycatchers** - not sure why this was so tough the previous day. We visited the ruins at Nan Madol (a little tricky to find and rather unintelligible without a guide.), As it continued to rain off and on, we returned to the hotel and did laundry.

April 11 After lunch at Ocean View, we turned in the car and Yvonne's drove us to the airport for the one hour flight to Chuuk, where we were met by a driver from Blue Lagoon. Much of the road through Weno has been resurfaced and does not resemble the horror stories of past trip reports. The driver stopped at a market so we could buy beers and avoid the lodge's \$6 beers (although it took a while to get a working fridge in our room). Wandering the beautiful grounds of the hotel, our only new bird was the **Caroline Islands Reed Warbler** which was common, along with many Ruddy Turnstones and Pacific Golden-plovers. At the dive shop, we arranged a boat trip to Dublon Island for the next morning. They understood exactly what we wanted - no problems doing a bird trip from a dive shop.

April 12 A pre-breakfast walk produced some Blue-faced Parrot-finches and a (Eurasian) Whimbrel. We left for Dublon about 8:45. We went to Dublon because Birdquest sees the monarch there, and we did not relish either the expense of the full day boat trip to South Tol and the difficult climb. (Thus we were foregoing any chance for the Truk or Tear-drop White-eye.) It was a 20 minute somewhat bumpy crossing in a small open boat. Our boatman and a guide (included with the boat rental) were both from Dublon and knew what bird we were looking for and where to find it. We tied up at a small village on the northern part of the island and walked 1/2 mile to a mangrove area. After about 1 1/2 hours, the guide located a stunning male **Truk Monarch**. While searching, we had a few **Oceanic Flycatchers**, and on the walk back a fly-by **Caroline Islands Ground-dove**. Because we were back in 3 hours, the dive shop lowered the price to \$170 from \$200.

I snorkeled some in the afternoon, and puttering around the grounds in the late afternoon we found Oceanic Flycatchers and some more ground doves.

April 13 Some more birding in the AM, some snorkeling, and the the flight to Saipan with a stopover in Guam. Picked up our hire car from Islander Rent-a-car (\$50/day) and drove to Hotel Serenti in Garapan.

April 14. After a really slow breakfast at IHOP we drove to the various war memorials at the north end of the island. Here **Mariana Kingfisher**, **Bridled White-eye**, **Golden White-eye**, the local ssp. of Rufous Fantail, **Mariana Fruit-dove** (gorgeous), and **White-throated Ground-dove** were easy. **Philippine Collared-dove**, a bird I missed in the Philippines, was a common introduction throughout Saipan, Tinian, and Rota.

After lunch, we drove up Mt. Tapochau. **Mariana Swiftlet** were common, along with many of the other endemics, and the view is impressive. From the road to Suicide Cliff back in the north, we took

Route 320, which goes along the back side of a golf course, where we had a flock of introduced Orange-cheeked Waxbills. This road eventually reaches Middle Road. Turning left here, at a sharp bend, there is a short trail called the Laderan Tangke Trail. (There is an illegible sign here for it). In this area we found our only **Saipan Reed Warbler**. This trail is also a site for Micronesian Scrubfowl, which we didn't see here.

April 15 Susan slept in and I drove to the Korean War monument, arriving around 6:30. The woods behind the left side of the monument are fairly open and not too steep. I walked back about 100 meters, sat down, and played some Xeno-canto. I got a squeak, then a **Micronesian** (Mariana) **Scrubfowl** landed nearby and circled me once, staying in the trees. (I tried the same approach next morning with no response.) This might be a different species from the one in Palau, but it is introduced (re-introduced?) here.

After breakfast, we took the 10:00AM Star Micronesia flight to Tinian. (\$99 RT, 6 seater airplane, reservation made a day ahead). We picked up another Islander car (\$45) and toured the island for a few hours, easily finding **Tinian Monarch**. (Our first one next to the rusted carcass of a small Japanese tank in the woods!) The northern half of the island is deserted, with overgrown patches of runway and a couple pits where the original two atomic bombs were stored; hard to believe this was the busiest airfield in the world in 1945. More Tinian Monarchs around here.

April 16 A little sightseeing around Saipan, then 1:30 flight to Rota. Picked up another Islander car (\$50/day), and drove to the Seabird Sanctuary. Great views of Red-footed and Brown Boobies, both tropicbirds, noddies, Greater Frigatebird, and White Terns. But no crows. Eventually checked into Hotel Valentino in Song Song at the south end of the island.

April 17 Drove various back roads between 5 and 6 AM, eventually finding a single **Guam Rail** at 5:45. The spot can be reached by taking the "main" road around the island counter-clockwise from the airport. About 1.2 miles after the pavement ends there is a road to the right. Our Bird was on this road where it forks again.

After wasting some time trying to find a coffee in Sinapolo, we drove out of town on the road heading south that circles the southern end of the island. At the first overlook, over Alaguan bay, we had a couple **Mariana Crows**, being harassed by White Terns. We ran into one of the U of Washington people working with the crow, who said there were 7 crows in this valley.

So, 27 hours left and one bird to go: Rota White-eye. The crow researchers probably know locations, but the one researcher we ran into was brand new on the job. Birdquest offers this helpful hint: "Easy if you know where to look." Well, we didn't. We spent 10-11 hours searching the two roads leading up to the savanna, including time on top (not many trees there, only new bird a Yellow Bittern) We spent the most time on the road up from the west as the trees are biggest here, including what I believe to be the area called "Stan's ranch" in older trip reports. Nothing. In hindsight this was a species I should have tried to get some more detailed info on, or made an effort to get in touch with the crow researchers for up-for-date gen.

April 18 Continuation of the unsuccessful Rota White-eye search. 1:15 flight to Guam via Saipan, followed by a 8 hour layover before the onward flight to Yap. The layover was eased considerably by a couple passes to the United Airlines lounge, a fringe benefit of the UA credit card I acquired before

booking the trip. Checked into the ESA Hotel in Colonia Yap around 1:30 AM.

April 19 After the late arrival, we slept in, had breakfast, then asked about a local guide named Tilus, who it turned out was in the restaurant. We arranged to go out with Tilus next morning for half a day, then wasted time around Colonia, arranging a snorkeling trip for, hopefully, Manta Rays. In the afternoon I took a walk from the hotel and found the pretty common **Plain White-eye**. (which is indeed plain)

April 20 Drove around most of the island with Tilus. **Yap Monarch** was pretty common and **Yap Cicadabird** was present in mangroves at the southern end of the island. Tilus didn't have a stakeout for Yap (Olive) White-eye, and admitted he had only seen them once or twice. He dropped us off at the start of the Tamil Yog trail, where he said it was possible. This was a nice trail, (more monarchs and at least one Cicadabird) and we returned several more times (it was within walking distance of the hotel), but never a glimpse of the white-eye.

April 21 Went snorkeling for Manta Rays without success, and the manta ray spot (where they formerly came to get cleaned by wrasses) is fairly boring without rays. We went to another spot with better visibility and much better fish and corals. Apparently the rays have largely abandoned Yap, something not at all obvious from the island's tourism promotions. (We met a SCUBA diver who had spent 4 days diving without a glimpse.) In the afternoon, still missing the white-eye, we rented a car from 7D and retraced part of our route we had taken with Tilus.

April 22 Tried the Tamil Yog trail again, then in early afternoon found a nice road that crosses the island north of Colonia, where we finally had a brief glimpse of the **Yap White-eye**. 11PM flight to Palau, where Jane (the owner of our Airbnb rental) picked us up.

April 23 A leisurely morning. Right in the front yard of the house we had **Palau Fruit-dove, Palau Swiftlet, Palau Kingfisher, Palau Cicadabird, Palau Fantail, Morningbird**, and **Dusky White-eye** for a good start on the endemics. Buff-banded Rails were quite common. Near the airport we had a fleeting view of what was probably a Micronesian (Palau) Scrubfowl.

In the afternoon we visited the Palau Pacific resort. They had no problem with non-guests walking the grounds and nature trail. On the latter, we found **Palau Flycatcher** and **Palau Bush-Warbler**.

In the evening we made an effort (without any gen) for the two night endemics (Palau Owl and Nightjar) trying roads and back roads near the airport, without any luck.

April 24 A leisurely day birding around town (Long I Park and Conservation Area, Malakal sewage ponds, more time at Pacific Resort. In the evening we tried again for night birds, and heard the owl at Long I. Park (where it is probably taped out). No trace of the Nightjar. In hind sight, these two and the Rota White-eye were the three birds for which we needed some solid information that wasn't available in trip reports.

April 25 For several of the endemics you need to get to a couple other islands: Ulong for Palau Ground-dove and Micronesian (Palau) Scrubfowl, and **Ngeruktabel Island** for Giant White-eye. This is expensive because in addition to the boat, fuel, and driver, you are required to have a licensed guide (\$150), and you must purchase Rock Island passes (\$50PP good for 10 days I think.) The guy we went with, Swing (swing@swingpalautours.com), was slightly cheaper as he is a licensed guide with his own boat, so we saved the \$150, but it still came to \$600 plus the Rock Island passes (which no one ever asked for). If you devoted two days and found groups going for picnics to each of the two islands you'd probably come out ahead and would probably have enough time on Ulong to find the Ground-dove (the only hard one).

So, on our last day in Micronesia we drove to the dock and met up with Swing. We had an excellent snorkel session en route Ulong. On Ulong you land at a beach and there is a pretty small forested area between the beach and the cliff, which is where you search. (You have to be a little careful with tides, because at low tide boats can't get very close to shore) We stayed three hours. Morningbird was very common here. Eventually we saw a number of **Micronesian (Palau) Scrubfowl**. But we had only a single glimpse of **Palau Ground-dove** walking around, despite staying an hour longer than we had planned. Then off to Margie's Beach on Ngeruktabel, where **Giant White-eye** was easily found right at the picnic area. After a boatload of picnickers left, a number of Rufous Night-herons arrived to look for leftovers. On the return to Koror we snorkeled at a fabulous spot where a sort of tunnel through a narrow piece of the island created a great flow of nutrients. Here in one compact area an incredible garden of soft corals grew, like nothing we had ever seen before. I highly recommend Swing.

Note: Most birders see Nicobar Pigeon on this boat trip; we only had distant views of very dark short tailed pigeons, so I am still looking for this bird.

Since we had to get up at 2:30, we didn't do any further night-birding.

April 26 Left Jane's car at the airport and flew to Tokyo and on to Amami-Oshima for our next bout of island birding.

Hindsight

Overall I wouldn't change much. We needed better gen on the Rota White-eye and Palau Owl and Nightjar (or should have worked harder on these two). I'm happy with our decision to just go to Dublon for the Truk Monarch. And we were lucky to get a glimpse of the dove on Ulong, I think it would be easy to miss.