

Birding Trip Report  
**Republic of Seychelles**  
1-9 February 2020



*Seychelles Parrot, National Bird of Seychelles*

A week-long family holiday to the central Seychelles islands, visiting the granitic islands of Mahé, Praslin, La Digue and Aride, (all are necessary to cover the thirteen endemic species). We managed to connect with all targets with relative ease, with the notable exception of Seychelles Scops Owl – which was a dip despite three valiant attempts in less-than-ideal, misty and rainy conditions. It should be noted that travel to the outer islands can be a challenge in rough seas and persistence may be required to get to Aride – especially after the reserve on Cousin Island was closed on two consecutive days due to poor weather. But flexibility and a degree of persistence has its rewards!

Herewith a few notes on our experience finding the endemics species (and an addendum list of some other species encountered.



*View towards the islands' capital, Victoria, from the viewpoint at Venn's Town on the main island of Mahé*

### **Mahé Island**

1. **Seychelles Blue-Pigeon, *Alectroenas pulcherima*** – this spectacular bird is found pretty much all through the islands and large groups are frequently encountered at fruiting fig trees. A reliable spot close to the capital is at the Botanical Gardens in Victoria:







2. **Seychelles/Madagascar Turtle Dove, *Nesoenas rostrata*** – it is noted in most guides that the pure Seychelles endemic form *rostrata* now hardly exists, except for a small population on the very remote Bird Island north of the main island group. Birds seen are now mostly hybrid forms of Madagascar Turtle Dove, *Nesoenas picturata* which is characterized by a grey head (the original Seychelles form has a dark brown head). The hybrid bird is very common throughout all islands.



3. **Seychelles Swiftlet, *Collocalia elaphra*** – there is a large colony of the endemic swiftlet just above La Gogue reservoir, at the northern end of Mahé Island. Here we saw hundreds wheeling in the skies above us (otherwise we encountered very few other apus-type birds in the islands):



4. **Seychelles Bulbul, *Hypsipetes crassirostris*** – common, especially at higher elevations in the central islands. We found a particularly reliable spot to be at the mission viewpoint in central Mahé. The birds here are used to picnickers and are raucous and garrulous – they are often heard well before they are seen!







5. **Seychelles Sunbird, *Cinnyris dussumieri*** – a very common bird of gardens and forest edge; apparently present on all central islands. Our photos fail to give justice to the rich dark blue throat of the male bird (female follows in a bouquet of bougainvillea):





6. **Seychelles White-eye, *Zosterops modestus*** – this Endangered bird is confined to Mahé (where there may be only an estimated 30-50 birds left) and the small outlier of Conception Island (which is a private resort island and not easy to visit without a hotel reservation). The Sinclair/Langrand guidebook notes that small populations have recently been translocated to Cousine and Frégate as part of a conservation programme (with a total global population now rising to 450 birds). With time running out, and fearing that we might not find the White-eye ourselves, we googled and enlisted the services of local guide, Steve Agricole of Birding Seychelles: [birdingseychelles@gmail.com](mailto:birdingseychelles@gmail.com) ; +248 260 81 69. Steve is based at Victoria and with his help, we eventually got onto a pair in the outer boroughs of Victoria – in a flowering avocado tree! Steve is a great chap and I would highly recommend him as a guide who is proud to assist the visiting birder:





7. **Seychelles Kestrel, *Falco araea*** – despite it being listed as common on Mahé, we only encountered this species once in four days - near the international airport at Victoria where it came in swooping horizontally to pounce on a Red Fody feeding on the ground. The bird and its prey disappeared again in the blink of an eye. Steve Agricole advised us to scan electricity wires and church steeples to locate the species.

8. Seychelles Scops Owl, *Otus insularis* – this species is only found in forests at higher elevations on Mahé. Despite three attempts, we were unable to locate it (or even hear its call). Our search was between 18:00 – 22:00 on two nights. On our last night in Seychelles, I sought the assistance of Steve Agricole (details above), but we were also unsuccessful. On each occasion, the weather was misty and on the third night, rainy and windy. Steve has agreed to track future sightings to determine which months might be more productive to seek out the bird.



*Steve Agricole, giving the thumbs-up after our successful encounter with the White-eye*

### **Praslin Island**

After three days on Mahé, we took the comfortable inter-island ferry to Baie Ste. Anne on Praslin Island. We spent two days on the island. Here our chief target was to visit the UNESCO Heritage site of the Vallée de Mai for the endemic:

9. **Seychelles (Black) Parrot, *Coracopsis barklyi*** – walking the trails inside the National Park, we encountered 5 parrots; four of them feeding on the ripe red fruit of palms. One other obliging bird sat for photographs on a dead branch high above the visitor entrance (photo below). We were informed that several escapee Rose-ringed Parakeets had been recently trapped and killed on Praslin, lest they present competition and a danger to the native parrot population.





*The Praslin endemic Coco de Mer palm – the heaviest seed on the planet*

### La Digue

Our next stop for one night was the small island of La Digue (ferries from Praslin every two hours). Here, our target was the sole island endemic:

**10. Seychelles Paradise-Flycatcher, *Terpsiphone corvina*** – easily seen in the Veuve Reserve and along its nature trails, only a few minute's walk from the main tourist street of the island capital. A small entrance fee is requested to assist with conservation efforts of this Critically Endangered species:









The female Seychelles Paradise Flycatcher:







And then things really started getting interesting...

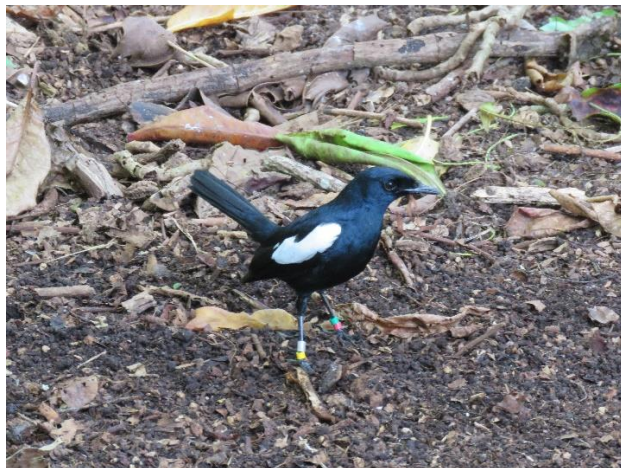
### Aride

My plan had been to try and see the remaining endemics on Cousin Island, a special avian reserve under the management of the Seychelles Government. For this, I contracted a boat and boatman to take me from Praslin on the fifth day of our holiday. However, rough seas foiled this attempt, as we were unable to land on the island due to the heavy swell. On the sixth day, I hired another boat and skipper and returned to Cousin at the appointed hour of 10:00am (when the local rangers meet visitors by rubber dingy offshore to ensure that no vermin are imported onto the island – rats, cats, etc.). My heart sunk when after one hour waiting, the local rangers indicated that we were not permitted to land (my boatman determined that they had had a rough night of partying).<sup>\*</sup> In a semi-panic, I asked my skipper to change course and take me to Aride Island, another birdlife reserve (reputedly owned by the Cadbury (chocolate) Family), and still quite some distance away in rough seas. As we finally approached the beach near the Aride research station, we were again foiled in our attempts to bring the boat to shore with waves crashing dangerously close around us. At this point, and having lost control of my senses, I jumped into the sea and waded ashore – to be greeted by the most congenial Frenchman and acting ranger for the island. I then spent two hours in great company touring the island and searching out my remaining targets:

<sup>\*</sup> It would seem to be important to try and check with the island rangers before embarking on a tour. It is reported that Aride is often closed due to bad weather, especially from May – August.



11. **Seychelles Magpie Robin, *Copsychus sechellarum*** – Endangered with 200 individuals recorded; only on Frégate, Cousin, Cousine and Aride. The bird is very confiding and easy to see around the research station. According to my Frenchman, the island can only support a small number due to the bird's highly aggressive territorial behaviour; fights to the death have been observed:





12. **Seychelles Warbler, *Acrocephalus sechellensis*** – Vulnerable species confined to Cousin, Cousine, Aride and Denis Islands. While less confiding than the Magpie-Robin, this unobtrusive warbler can be relatively easily seen along the forested trails behind the research station:



*A nesting Seychelles Warbler*

13. **Seychelles Fody, *Foudia sechellarum*** – Near Threatened species, with ‘pure’ populations now confined to Cousin, Cousine, Frégate and Aride. On Mahé, the species has been supplanted by the Red Fody, originally from Madagascar. A few Seychelles Fodies were seen in close proximity to the research station:



*Seychelles Fody in combat for food with one of Aride's endemic lizards*



Other notable species encountered during the tour (excluding migrant waders):

Red (Madagascar) Fody, *Foudia madagascarensis* – very common on Mahé and apparently prey for the Seychelles Kestrel:



*The female Red Fody*



**Tropical Shearwater, *Puffinus bailloni*** – a life species for me; several seen skimming the ocean waves on the boat to Aride. Below is a photo of the shearwater's nesting burrow between fallen coconuts on Aride Island (part of the bird's wing is visible in the hole):



**White-tailed Tropicbird, *Phaethon lepturus*** – very common throughout the islands; many nesting birds seen on Aride:







Greater Frigatebird, *Fregata minor* – common; breeds on Aride



**Lesser Noddy, *Anous tenuirostris*** – a life bird for me; very common and confiding on Aride where it breeds:





Common White Tern, *Gygis alba* – common on Aride where it nests on open branches; the survival rate of chicks is reported to be less than 20%





Barred Ground Dove, *Geopelia striata* – this striking dove is abundant throughout the islands:



Green-backed Heron, *Butorides striata* – several seen; mostly around sunset

Purple Heron, *Ardea purpurea* – two seen on Mahé



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Kinshasa, 1 March 2020

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*Touring Aride with the island reserve ranger*

