

# Seychelles

4<sup>th</sup> February – 11<sup>th</sup> February 2024

## Introduction

This was a trip together with my wife so it was not totally dedicated to birding. However, I did manage to see all 12 endemics available on Mahe, Praslin, Cousin and La Digue as well as picking up some good seabirds, Crab Plover and the widespread White (Fairy) Tern. I would not have been so successful without the use of a guide (Steve Agricole) on Mahe. Seychelles White-eye appears to be down to just two birds at its traditional site in La Misère. I also had problems with Seychelles Kestrel, which I eventually saw well after a lot of searching; apparently it is relatively easy in Victoria so I think it was just being awkward on the day!

## Flights

We had booked return flights to Johannesburg nearly a year in advance as they were so well priced and we could be entirely flexible with our dates. We had no real plan at the time what we would do, so it was not until November that we started booking accommodation and hatched a plan to have a week in the Seychelles, followed by a week in the Garden Route on the Cape coast.

We flew Swissair via Zurich with an overlay of one night at the Airport Tower Lodge in Johannesburg. The next day we flew the five hours flight direct to Mahe with Seychelles Airways. This was a good flight and for once in economy class, we had really nice food in the form of a chicken curry and rice.

## Accommodation

### **Beach Cottages, Beau Vallon, Mahe.**

A decent self-catering apartment with nice grounds adjacent to a rocky beach. There was a great food delivery service, providing nice curries, fish, salads etc. We stayed 4 nights before transferring to Praslin and a single night at the end of the week before flying back to Johannesburg.

The accommodation is privately-owned, very secure with a laundry service, snorkelling gear and a good pick-up/drop off taxi service for the airport/ferry etc.

Reasonable birding with White Terns flying over regularly, Seychelles Sunbird, Great Frigatebird, Striated Heron, Malagasy Turtle Dove, Zebra Dove, Red Fody and a selection of common waders.

### **Palm Beach Hotel, Praslin.**

A nice enough colonial style hotel with grounds leading onto a small beach. The food was reasonable although breakfast was not much to write home about. There is also a nice takeaway store across the road serving great creole food.

The rear of the hotel overlooked the Vallée de Mai and adjacent forests and was good for birding, including a number of endemics; there is a nice terrace on the first floor offering good views across the road. I massively lucked in on the Seychelles Black Parrot here as I stepped out of our room, I saw a large dark bird sitting in a dead tree. I could not believe my eyes when it transformed

into a parrot as I raised my binoculars. I had a further pair in flight on 3 occasions that afternoon. This saved me a hot afternoon searching for the birds and allowed me to get precious brownie points with my non-birder wife! I also saw Seychelles Swiftlet, Bulbul and Sunbird here.

There are a number of bars and eateries a short walk away and a small store across the road. The hotel can arrange excursions to nearby islands, including Cousin, which we visited.

We spent 2 nights here which was enough to have a morning on Cousin. Torrential afternoon rain curtailed any further activities so we simply chilled out at the hotel, meaning that we did not see too much of Praslin.

A final word of warning – the sea held loads of immature sting rays, which were very close to the beach so beware if swimming or wading in the shallow waters here!

## Guide

As a rather late decision, I contacted Steve Agricole at very short notice for a combined birding and sight-seeing day tour. Steve is a well-known local bird guide based on Mahe and is contactable on WhatsApp: +248 2 608 169. Steve proved to be a great guide and very good company. He is well-versed on the history and politics of the Seychelles, not to mention the birds and wildlife. He was very punctual and worked hard to get me all the Mahe endemics, especially the aforementioned Seychelles Kestrel. The undoubted highlight of the day was seeing Seychelles Scops Owl, which to my surprise proved to be relatively easy, having read a number of trip reports where people do not connect. We paid two visits to the White-eye site and obtained great views on the second visit.

## Getting Around and sites visited

A daily ferry runs between Mahe and Praslin (the same boat goes onto La Digue). We booked the ferry online beforehand on the second-class upper deck, which proved to be a good decision for sea-watching. The journey out to Praslin proved to be fairly quiet but the evening return was very fruitful with both Tropical and Wedge-tailed Shearwaters.

We day tripped La Digue from Praslin. As we had checked out of our hotel, we were able to check-in our bags at the Praslin ferry terminal as we were returning to Mahe that evening. We caught the first ferry over to La Digue, hired bikes and spent a pleasant day there. At 4pm we boarded the return ferry to Mahe, which stopped at Praslin, where our bags were loaded on board. This was enormously helpful as it meant that we did not have to lug them around La Digue!

Cycling is certainly the best way to see La Digue. There are plenty of bike hire operators near the ferry port, offering decent enough bikes for a reasonable fee.

## Birding

For anyone unfamiliar with the Seychelles, you basically need to visit the following locations to ensure you see all the endemics:

**Mahe:** Seychelles Blue Pigeon, Seychelles White-eye, Seychelles Kestrel, Seychelles Sunbird, Seychelles Bulbul, Seychelles Swiftlet and Seychelles Scops Owl.

The Sunbird is widespread and fairly easy. Likewise with a little effort the Pigeon and Bulbul are both reasonably easy. On our first morning, we decided to hike the Anse Major trail from Beau

Vallon; the trail takes you through some nice habitat, culminating in two small, picturesque beaches. A word of warning – take plenty of water as it is hot and humid en route. The birding was pleasant with the first three endemics, Seychelles Sunbird, Seychelles Blue Pigeon and Seychelles Bulbul all seen well. I saw a number of White-tailed Tropicbirds as well as Great Frigatebird and Lesser Crested Tern.



I would recommend hiring Steve for the day for the Scops Owl and the White-eye as it will significantly increase your chances. The White-eye site is weird, in that it is a nice residential area, just like many other places on the island. Quite why the White-eyes like this particular spot is a

mystery! Sadly, the situation for the White-eyes is concerning and it may well be that these birds are no longer available on Mahe in the near future.

As I mentioned before, the Seychelles Kestrel was very uncooperative. I had a bird calling very close to the car while Steve was attending to some business at his house. Unfortunately, I did not see it and thereby set off a wild goose chase for the day. Steve took me to several sites in Victoria, where they are known to roost. We were probably a little too early and did not connect with them. Eventually, we had terrific views of a bird perched on wires next to the road, much to my relief.



The Seychelles Scops Owl is eminently miss-able, as evidenced in several trip reports but the Salazie trail seems to be one of the better spots for it in Morne Seychelles NP. I was not overly confident. We stopped to get water nearby and as we arrived, we met a small boy who had caught a Seychelles Chameleon. I paid him a small amount of money and we explained to him that it would die if he kept it. We released it on the Salazie trail; a great moment and privilege to see this tiny endemic reptile. I then had great views of the Seychelles Scops Owl along the trail. It was a terrific end to a very enjoyable day.



Crab Plover is very popular with visiting birders and is available at Roche Caiman Lagoon, adjacent to the airport. I had fairly distant views of 3-4 birds

**Praslin:** Seychelles Black Parrot. Primarily seen at the Vallée de Mai reserve, although it is widely seen at other localities on the island. As mentioned, the Palm Beach Hotel proved as good as anywhere. Seychelles Blue Pigeon, Seychelles Kestrel, Seychelles Sunbird, Seychelles Bulbul, and Seychelles Swiftlet are also available.

Just along the road (south eastwards) from the Palm Beach Hotel, there is an EBird hotspot called 'Grande Anse – Wetland Restoration'. I visited the site early in the morning and accessed the beach at a couple of points from the road. I saw few waders on the beach here, including a Tibetan Sand Plover, so definitely worth a visit.

**Cousin:** Seychelles Magpie Robin, Seychelles Warbler and Seychelles Fody are available on Cousin. Some birders go to Aride, which is further away but I did not visit. The Robin and Fody are easy with very habituated, tame birds around. The Warbler is a little more difficult but relatively straight-forward; I saw three birds. Both Seychelles Blue Pigeon and Seychelles Sunbird are very easy here too. Cousin is excellent for White-tailed Tropicbird and White Tern which seemed to be nesting everywhere. I also had great views of Lesser and Brown Noddy as well as Bridled Terns.

There is some speculation that the local population of Malagasy Turtle Doves holds examples of the Seychelles sub-species; my impression is that they have different plumage to the Mahe and Praslin birds so there may be something in the theory. It was interesting to look at the differences on my photographs but I am not expecting a split any time soon!

Cousin is easily visited in a morning. We hired an excursion from our hotel. You can only go to Cousin as part of a guided tour so you have no choice other than to be part of a bigger group of people, who largely visit for the Giant Tortoises. This turned out to be okay and the guides were very helpful in looking for the Seychelles Warbler.

**La Digue:** The Seychelles Paradise Flycatcher is easily gettable on La Digue at the Veuve Nature Reserve. Hire a bike and cycle there – it is close to the main town and about 10 minutes away from the pier.

Finally, a special mention has to go to the Seychelles Fruit Bat, which throughout the trip had me instinctively raising my binoculars to look at a raptor. Old habits die hard! They are very common and it is easy to obtain great views daily.



## Checklist

1	Seychelles Swiftlet	<i>Aerodramus elaphrus</i>	Seen at the White-eye site on Mahe and at the rear of the Palm Beach Hotel on Praslin.
2	Rock Dove (Feral)	<i>Columba livia</i> 'feral'	Widespread.
3	Malagasy Turtle Dove	<i>Nesoenas picturatus</i>	Reasonably common. Seen all days.
4	Zebra Dove	<i>Geopelia striata</i>	Widespread.

5	Seychelles Blue Pigeon	<i>Alectroenas pulcherrimus</i>	Reasonably widespread in the forest habitat. Seen on Mahe at various locations and on Cousin.
6	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	Seen at Veuve NR on La Digue.
7	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	Several birds seen On Mahe, Praslin and La Digue.
8	Tibetan Sand Plover	<i>Anarhynchus atrifrons</i>	A single bird on the beach at Grande Anse Wetland Restoration (EBird hotspot) on 09/02.
9	Eurasian Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	Several birds seen on Mahe and Praslin.
10	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	1 bird at Beach Cottages daily on the grass & another on Praslin
11	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	Seen on Mahe and Praslin.
12	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	Seen on Cousin and at Beach Cottages
13	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	Seen on the beach at Palm Beach Hotel on Praslin.
14	Crab Plover	<i>Dromas ardeola</i>	3-4 birds at Roche Caiman lagoon on 06/02.
15	White Tern	<i>Gygis alba</i>	Reasonably common. Seen all days.
16	Brown Noddy	<i>Anous stolidus</i>	Many birds on Cousin and ferry between Praslin and Mahe
17	Lesser Noddy	<i>Anous tenuirostris</i>	Several birds on Cousin on 09/02.
18	Bridled Tern	<i>Onychoprion anaethetus</i>	8 birds seen on Cousin on 09/02.
19	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	Several birds seen in Bel Ombre on 05/02.
20	Lesser Crested Tern	<i>Thalasseus bengalensis</i>	3 seen in Bel Ombre and 1 at la Digue ferry port.
21	Greater Crested Tern	<i>Thalasseus bergii</i>	Regular sightings from most beaches. Seen on all days.
22	White-tailed Tropicbird	<i>Phaethon lepturus</i>	Regular sightings. Seen on all days.
23	Wedge-tailed Shearwater	<i>Ardenna pacifica</i>	2-3 seen from the ferry between Praslin and Mahe on 10/02
24	Tropical Shearwater	<i>Puffinus bailloni</i>	2 seen from the ferry between Praslin and Mahe on 10/02
25	Great Frigatebird	<i>Fregata minor</i>	Odd birds seen most days on Mahe, Praslin and La Digue.
26	Striated Heron	<i>Butorides striata</i>	A regular bird at Beach Cottages and also in Beau Vallon
27	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	Birds seen near the airport on Mahe on 06/02.
28	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	Seen on Mahe on 05/02.
29	Seychelles Scops Owl	<i>Otus insularis</i>	Great views of a calling bird at Morne NP, Mahe on 06/02.
30	Seychelles Kestrel	<i>Falco araeus</i>	A single bird on wires outside Victoria on 06/02.
31	Seychelles Black Parrot	<i>Coracopsis barklyi</i>	At least 1 pair seen from the Palm Beach Hotel on 08/02.
32	Seychelles Paradise Flycatcher	<i>Terpsiphone corvina</i>	4 birds seen at Veuve Nr, La Digue on 10/02.
33	Seychelles Bulbul	<i>Hypsipetes crassirostris</i>	Seen on Anse Major trail & at the Palm Beach Hotel.
34	Seychelles Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus sechellensis</i>	3 birds seen on Cousin on 09/02.
35	Seychelles White-eye	<i>Zosterops modestus</i>	2 birds heard & seen at the site in La Misère on 06/02.
36	Common Myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>	Widespread.
37	Seychelles Magpie-robin	<i>Copsychus sechellarum</i>	At least 6 birds seen on Cousin on 09/02.
38	Seychelles Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris dussumieri</i>	Fairly common throughout.
39	Red Fody	<i>Foudia madagascariensis</i>	Widespread.
40	Seychelles Fody	<i>Foudia sechellarum</i>	Many birds seen on Cousin on 09/02.