

TRIP REPORT PALAU April 29 – May 6, 2019

Palau is a remote island nation in the south-west Pacific that is not easy to get to but boasts the biggest number of endemic birds of all the Micronesian states and territories. It also has some of the finest coastal scenery in the world so we opted to spend a week there, interrupting a three-week trip [to Taiwan](#). There are daily flights between Taipei and Koror, the Palau capital. I saw all 13 endemics and three other Micronesian specialties in Palau. I'd previously birded only Guam and the Marianas in Micronesia.

Seeing the Palau birds requires visiting two of the famed Rock Islands – Ulong and Ngeruktabel. I saw all the endemics on those islands except the owl and nightjar. Many can also be seen easily around Koror, especially Long Island, an area of forest adjoining a waterside park on the southern edge of the town.

It's not cheap visiting the Rock Islands. I organised a full day visit to Ulong Island with operator Fish N Fins for \$US130 per person for three of us which included lunch and a \$50 government permit fee. That was a relatively good rate. The Rock Islands are one of the world's top diving destinations, as well as offering spectacular scenery, so tourism operators in Koror are doing a roaring trade.

We were dropped off at 9.30am on Ulong Island, the scene for a season of the American television program *Survivor*, as our boat headed back to sea for diving. The boat was to return to join us for lunch on the island but did not do so until 2pm. That was a blessing in disguise because I did not find the coveted Palau Ground-Dove until 15 minutes before the boat's return. A single dove was scratching around in dense thickets at the far end of a relatively small area of forest that extends from the picnic tables to the end of the beach.

Several hours of searching up to that point were dove-free, but plenty of good birds were about. A number of Micronesian Megapodes were present; this was the only place I saw the species. It was also the only site where I saw Rusty-capped Kingfisher and Micronesian Imperial-Pigeon, although I heard the latter on Long Island.

Of major concern is the large number of black and Norwegian rats on Ulong Island, which swam there from a sinking ship in 1784. They are active during the day, boldly foraging in the open. It seems something of a miracle that they haven't wiped out the resident birds, as they did on Lord Howe and numerous other islands. The ground-dove, however, has declined sharply in recent years and is now listed as endangered. The island has long been the major site for birders looking for the species but a sighting is no longer assured. Also on Ulong were Morningbird, Palau Flycatcher, Palau Bush-Warbler, Citrine White-eye, Dusky White-eye and Palau Fantail.

On the way back we enjoyed motoring through the wonderful Rock Islands ([video here](#)) and stopped for a snorkelling session. Several Palau Flying-foxes were disturbed from their island roosts.

Fish N Fins was demanding a huge fee for a half-day visit to Ngeruktabel. Although it is much closer to Koror than Ulong, the diving boats don't go there so a special charter is needed, and a new government rule requires that tourists walking the German Lighthouse Trail on the island be accompanied by a guide. I instead found a small operator who took us there for \$50 a head. This is the only site where the enigmatic Giant White-eye can be seen, unless you take the time-consuming and expensive option of visiting distant Peleliu.

It rained here and the white-eyes were not easy to find although they were calling. A party was eventually tracked down near the summit, a 2km walk uphill from where the boat stops. Also of interest were many relics from World War II on the island with canons, bunkers and all manner of objects left behind by the retreating Japanese.

I saw Palau Cicadabird on Ngeruktabel and later another on Long Island, where most of the endemics were also seen. Blue-faced Parrotfinches were feeding in casuarinas in the park at Long Island. I also ran into a friendly Palau birding group there.

Palau Swiftlet and Palau Fruit-Dove were all over the place, as were Micronesian Starling and Micronesian Myzomela.

I visited Ice Box Park, the sewage ponds outside Koror on Malakal Island, where I found an unexpected Pectoral Sandpiper. Yellow Bittern was seen a few times around Koror.

Palau Owl, probably the most sought after endemic, is supposedly shy, unresponsive to playback and difficult to locate. A pair were resident in secondary growth opposite our accommodation, the Guest Lodge Palau. They called often and contrary to expectations were very responsive to playback and easy to see. I also saw Palau Nightjar here. Thanks to Rob Tizard for tips on these two. A warning though. The guest lodge is relatively inexpensive and conveniently close to town, but it's run-down. Our sheets had not been changed, the taps didn't work properly and the community kitchen was filthy.

Seabirds like White Tern and Black Noddy are all about the islands, often flying over the hotel, as did small groups of Nicobar Pigeons. The only target I missed was the largely nocturnal Slaty-legged Crane, although I heard one at Ngernid near Koror. The forest trail at the Palau Pacific Resort on Arakebesang Island is supposedly a good site for the species but I was refused entry. I did manage good views of Palau Bush-Warbler here from the carpark.

We hired a car and drove around the main island of Palau, Babelduob. The local race of Buff-banded Rail, without a buff band, was

common roadside. Cultural sites such as the Badrulchau Stone Monoliths were of interest.

SPECIES *denotes lifer [] = introduced

Brown Noddy (common), Black Noddy (common), White Tern (common), Bridled Tern (common), Black-naped Tern (common), Whiskered Tern (a few Ice Box Park), Crested Tern,

White-tailed Tropicbird (widespread in small numbers),

Eastern Reef-Egret, Little Egret, Intermediate Egret,

Rufous Night-Heron (common and diurnal), Yellow Bittern,

Common Sandpiper, Ruddy Turnstone, Terek Sandpiper, Common Greenshank,

Marsh Sandpiper, Grey-tailed Tattler, Pectoral Sandpiper (1 Ice Box Park),

Lesser Sand-Plover, Pacific Golden Plover,

Buff-banded Rail (common), Slaty-legged Crake (1 heard Ngerid), [Red Junglefowl],

*Micronesian Megapode (6-8 Ulong Island, several mounds),

Nicobar Pigeon (2 Ulong Island; pairs & small flocks flying overhead around Koror),

*Palau Fruit-Dove (common and widespread),

*Micronesian Imperial-Pigeon (2 seen, others heard Ulong Island; 1 heard Long Island),

*Palau Ground-Dove (1 Ulong Island),

[Eclectus Parrot], [Sulphur-crested Cockatoo],

Collared Kingfisher (common and widespread),

*Palau Owl (a pair Koror outside hotel; a second pair heard distantly),

*Palau Nightjar (1 Koror outside hotel),

*Rusty-capped Kingfisher (2 Ulong Island),

*Palau Swiftlet (common and widespread),

*Palau Cicadabird (1 Ngeruktabel Island; 1 Long Island),

*Palau Fantail (widespread in small numbers),

*Palau (Mangrove) Flycatcher (2 Ulong Island; 1 Babelduob Island; 1 Long Island),

*Morningbird (fairly common and widespread by call, especially easy to see Ulong Island),

*Palau Bush-Warbler (fairly common by call, best views Palau Pacific Resort),

Micronesian Myzomela (common and widespread),

*Dusky White-eye (fairly common and widespread),

*Citrine (Caroline Islands) White-eye (common Ulong Island; 1 group Koror),

*Giant White-eye (2 seen others heard Ngeruktabel Island),

Blue-faced Parrotfinch (4-6 seen on two occasions Long Island),

Micronesian Starling (common and widespread), Eastern Yellow Wagtail,

Barn Swallow, Chestnut Munia, Eurasian Tree Sparrow. TOTAL 48 species (16 lifers)

MAMMALS

*Palau Flying-Fox (common),

*Pacific Sheath-tailed Bat (common).