

New Caledonia (Grande Terre & Lifou)
29th December 2019 to 10th January 2020

Mark & Linda Sutton



Introduction

This trip was taken at the end of a 9-week sabbatical for me and a 6-week sabbatical for Linda. We had both toured New Zealand for 4 weeks prior to this and I had been on a Sub Antarctic cruise for 18 days before Linda's arrival.

Currency

The local currency is the Pacific Franc (Xpf) $1 = 0.0071$ Pound sterling. (at time of writing). Credit & Debit cards are accepted almost everywhere

Shops, Banks etc

There is a good network of supermarkets and local shops.

Note that sales of alcohol are restricted: It cannot be sold on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays between 12 noon and 9pm nor on public holidays. (apparently due to an alcohol abuse issue on the island). I believe that restaurants may be exempt from this rule.

Banks (BCi: BANQUE CALEDONIENNE D'INVESTISSEMENT) & ATMS were widespread

Food

We self-catered for the duration of our stay as outside of Numeou we found it difficult to find any cafes/restaurants. Food is more expensive than in the UK but adequate choice and very good breads and pastries. In the accommodation, we drank the tap water as it was supplied from a local spring and was perfectly fine.

Mobile Phones

Local (Tourist) Simms can be obtained at the local Post Offices – which was closed at the airport when we arrived.

Out spare iPhone turned out to be locked (schoolboy error!), so were unable to use it with a local sim card but in NZ we had used a local sim in our iPad which we used as a personal hotspot. We tried to do this in New Cal, but the local Post Office advised us that they were unable to provide tourist sims for iPad's (not really sure why?!)

Transport

We hired a Peugeot 108 for the duration which was fine, although a little underpowered especially on the hill climbs. This was booked through Rentalcars.com and the local agent was Point Rouge, who seem to be one of the main rental companies on the island. Cost £397.12, for 2 drivers and an allowance 150 Kms per day.

On Lifou, I struggled to find any hire car companies (with e-mail addresses / websites), eventually I managed to locate a local wildlife tour operator based in New Caledonia: run by Isabelle, who was very helpful in arranging a local hire car for me.

The company we used was I'ilot reve, and a Peugeot 208 cost 7,000 Xpf.

There was also a hire car company located immediately outside the airport: Loca v, locav@lagoon.nc . One of the challenges is that these local hire car companies may not speak / read English, so you may be wise to try and contact them in French.

Airports

The main international airport, LaTontouta International Airport (NOU) is situated 56km NW of Noumea.

The domestic airport Magenta Airport (GEA) for flights to Lifou etc) is situated on the edge in Noumea.

Books, Trip Reports and recordings

The only field guide I used was the Helm field guide: “Birds of Melanesia” by Guy Dutson.

Trip reports:

New Caledonia bird report 15-27 August 2015, Tommy P Pedersen

New Caledonia – Searching for the endemics- 23 September – 29 September, Stephen Blaber.

All sound recordings were downloaded from the Bird Call Xeno app.

Local contacts

The local wildlife tour company in New Caledonia: caledoniabirds.com, is run by Isabelle Jollit. isabelle@caledoniabirds.com (the e-mail we used) or isa@caledoniabirds.com (an alternative we had seen quoted on her advert). Isabelle offers guided birding on Grande Terre – especially River Blue Park.

We self-guided throughout, but Isabelle was very helpful in sorting out a hire car for me on Lifou.

SatNav

We used Google Maps on our iPhones throughout, but as we did not have a local Sim, we relied on downloading all map data using Wi-Fi at our accommodation. All sites were easy to find.

Accommodation.

We booked an excellent 1 bedroomed fully equipped, self-contained cabin in Monte Dore at a cost of £505.08 for 12 nights through Airbnb.

The cabin was adjacent to a private home, and situated within a large garden with unlimited use of the swimming pool. It was in a wonderful location about 500m from the sea, set on a hillside overlooking the ocean.

Wi-Fi was always available, although the signal was poor from our cabin it was excellent only a few yards away from the shared veranda.

The owners Sylvie & Zag Avron spoke good English, which was useful as we spoke no French. It was very useful to be able to converse with Sylvie & Zag for advice & local knowledge.

Accommodation contact details:

Avron.f@canl.nc

zagavron@hotmail.fr

Address:

Bungalow vue mer et montagne, 285 allée du grand bleu Route de la corniche Mont-Dore Sud, Mont-Dore, Province Sud 98809, New Caledonia

This proved to be very convenient location for the main birding sites:

Mon Koghi – 45 minutes' drive

Noumea – 35 minutes' drive

Parc de la Riviere Bleue (entrance gate) 40 minutes' drive.

The only sites that were any great distance away were the Thicketbird site, a 2-hour 45-minute drive & Parc les Grandes Fougères a 2-hour drive. Parc les Grandes Fougères is on the way to the Thicketbird so can be covered on the same day trip, which we did very successfully.

There is a hiking trail which starts very close to the accommodation, with some reasonable habitat along its start (the only section we visited): Mont Dore Corniche Sud Trail

There is a small shop on the main RP2, just before the entrance road up to the house and a major supermarket, petrol station, ATM and Post Office 10kms away.

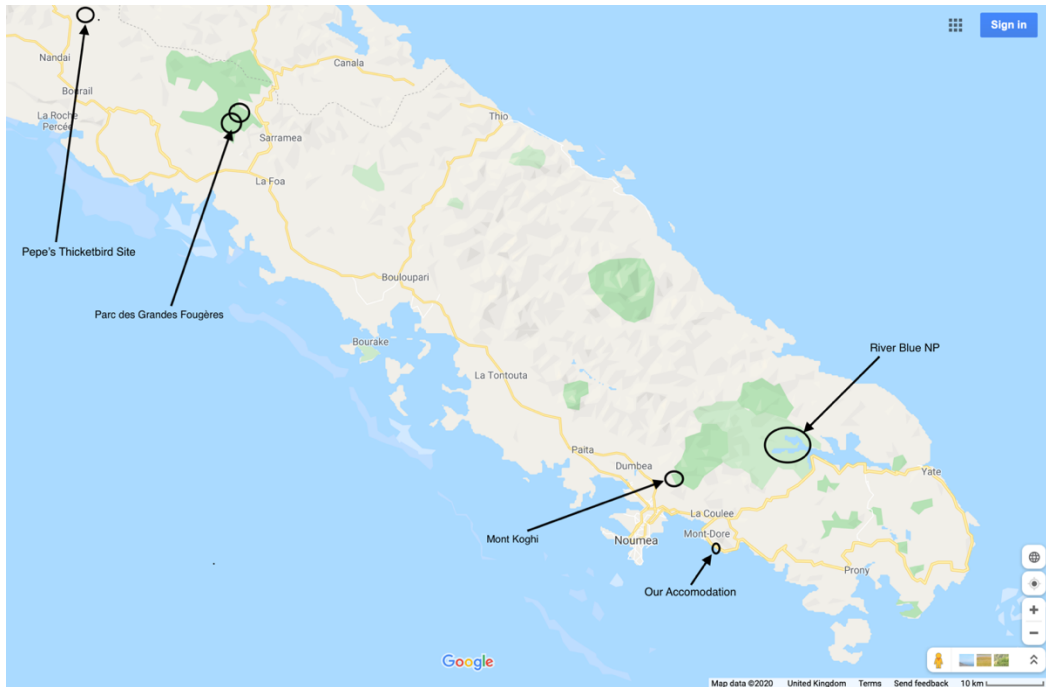


Time zone & weather

New Caledonia is in the same time zone as the east coast of Australia even though it's much further east, as a result sunrise was at about 5.30 and sunset about 18.30

Daytime temperatures varied from mid 20's to low 30s. Dry most days with a mix of sun & cloud. On our second full day (at River Blue NP) we had light rain for several hours.

Sites



Mont Koghi

This is probably the second most important birding site. We birded the road near the Koghi Parc Aventure and Auberge du Mont Koghi, plus the first 500 meters or so of the trails, as this has traditionally been a good site for Horned Parakeet, we possible heard but did not see any here. Even in our limited time spent on the trails they were quite productive and the only place we saw Southern Shrikebill and the road besides the Parc Aventure was the only place we saw Cloven-feathered Dove.



Parc de la Rivere Bleue (Blue River NP)

This the main birding site on the island, most of the endemics can be found here, and some nowhere else.

The park is open daily except Mondays and entrance is from 7.00 until 14.00 and you have to leave by 17.00. The entrance fee is 600Xpf per person plus a further 600Xpf per person for the shuttle bus.

It is about a 20-minute drive from the main entrance, to the car park at Pont Perignon from which you can access the main area of the park. You cannot enter the main area of the park (where the key birds are) by car, but have to access by shuttle (or walk, but it's about 7km to the start of the decent habitat). Bikes can also be hired from the car park at Pont Perignon.

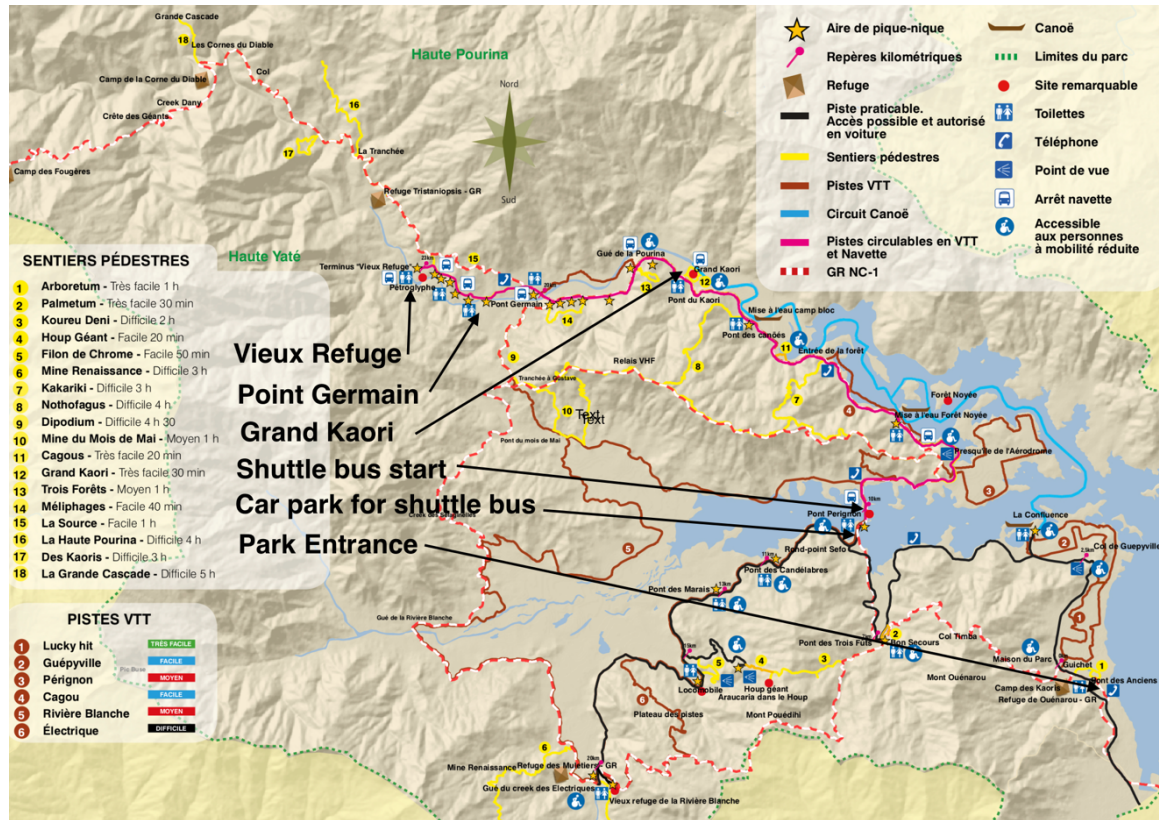
The first bus departs at 7.30 (see timetable below)

The best habitat & therefore the best area for most species is from about 500 m before Grand Kaori, when entering the park, through to Point Germain. But the track from Point Germain to Vieux Refuge also held some decent birds and this area was the only area we saw the Parrotfinch in the park and where we had most sightings of New Caledonian Parakeet.

We did not bird any of the trails other than the short Grand Kaori loop trail, but concentrated on birding the along the main track.

We tended to arrive at the park entrance before it was open in order to bird the area around the small car park. The gates to the park open at 7.00 and this is where you purchase your entrance tickets and shuttle bus tickets, you then drive the 20 minutes to the car park of Pont Perignon for the first shuttle bus.

Map of River Blue NP



Blue River NP Shuttle bus timetable

Aller							Retour						
	1	2	3	4	5	6		1	2	3	4	5	6
PONT PÉRIGNON	7h30	9h	10h30	12h15	13h45	15h15	VIEUX REFUGE	8h15	9h45	11h15	13h	14h30	15h45
GRAND KAORI	7h50	9h20	10h50	12h35	14h05	15h35	REF. SCIENTIFIQUES	8h20	9h50	11h20	13h05	14h35	15h50
GUÉ POURINA	7h55	9h25	10h55	12h40	14h10	15h35	3 CASES	8h25	9h55	11h25	13h10	14h40	15h55
PONT GERMAIN	8h	9h30	11h	12h45	14h15	15h40	PONT GERMAIN	8h30	10h	11h30	13h15	14h45	16h
3 CASES	8h05	9h35	11h05	12h50	14h20	15h40	GUÉ POURINA	8h35	10h05	11h35	13h20	14h50	16h05
REF. SCIENTIFIQUES	8h10	9h40	11h10	12h55	14h25	15h40	GRAND KAORI	8h40	10h10	11h40	13h25	14h55	16h10
VIEUX REFUGE	8h15	9h45	11h15	13h	14h30	15h45	PONT PÉRIGNON	9h	10h30	12h	13h45	15h15	16h30

Parc les Grandes Fougères

An entrance fee is payable before you enter the barriered car park from where there are a series of hiking trails of various lengths, we only birded the ridge trail and returning along one of the lower trails. This is a popular walking/ hiking destination and the car park was almost full when we arrived.

PePe's Thicketbird Site (Bourail Grasslands)

Grid reference: -21.446140, 165.517397. Despite the area being recently ravaged by fire, we managed to find the Thicketbird, in a relatively small, undamaged section of bunch grass, just beyond PePe's original site. The track where the birds are is undrivable (except possibly by a decent 4x4), but there is a pull in where you can park at the start of the uphill trail.



Lifou

We caught the 9.00 Air Caledonie flight from Noumea Magenta airport and departed from Lifou at 19.40. It was a successful trip, but we probably should have caught the earlier flight to Lifou, as by the time we got to the Hapetra Forest Trail, where we did most of our birding and saw all our targets, it was late morning and very hot.



Itinerary

December 29th

Arrived LaTontouta International Airport at 15.00, picked up the hire car, exchanged some cash & headed off to Mont-Dore and our accommodation for the next 12 nights, which was about an hour's drive away. This was a surprise as we had not realised that the international airport was not in Noumea itself!

December 30th

Early morning birding around the grounds of our accommodation before heading to the local supermarket for supplies.

In the Afternoon we drove to Mount Koghi, birding the area around the entrance plus about 500m along a couple of the trails.

December 31st

River Blue NP: Despite being at the entrance at 7.00, we were told that we would be too late to catch the 7.30 minibus from Pont Perignon, in reality I don't think they ran a 7.30 minibus (due to it being Christmas Eve / lack of staff ??), so we caught the 9.00 one instead. We birded from Grand Kaori including the loop trail, along the main track to Pont Germain catching the 13.15 minibus back to Pont Perignon and ate our packed lunch.

January 1st

Morning at Mount Koghi, with most of the time spent along the roads around the Auberge and Parc Aventure, hoping for Horned Parakeet. We left early afternoon and spent the rest of the day around the Mont Dore area.

January 2nd

River Blue NP: We caught the 7.30 (actually 7.40) minibus to Vieux Refuge and walked the track back Grand Kaori, Linda had a swim in the river before catching the 13.25 minibus back to Pont Perignon and ate our packed lunch before slowly making our way back to Mont Dore.

January 3rd

Day off from birding - Chilled out and visited Noumea.

January 4th

An early start to get to PePe's Thicketbird Site (Bourail Grasslands), arriving at 7.20am. It was clear even before we arrived at the site, that there had been a widespread fire in the area in the last few months. We walked the few hundred meters up the track to the area indicated in previous reports but were surrounded by bare ground & scorched trees and a few inches of grass that was just starting to shoot. We debated whether to continue along the track or to try a new area, but opted to try further along the track, as it was a daunting

prospect to find a new site. After a further few hundred meters, we found a shallow valley dropping down to the road which held an area of bunch grass about 1-meter high that had missed the worst of the fire. I decided to play the Thicketbird call, more in desperation than real hope but to my amazement a bird responded only a few meters away in the “valley” after a few minutes wait and no sign of the bird we moved to a better vantage point overlooking the valley. We played the call again and after a minute or so a bird called very close but out of sight, although we did see the grass move! After about 15 minutes and when we were starting to doubt if we would see the bird, it flew down the valley and landed in full view in a bare bush & proceeded to preen & give excellent views for the next 10 minutes. What a result, after thinking this was a no chance bird, due to the condition of the site.

We then headed to Parc les Grandes Fougères, where we spent the afternoon birding the ridge trail, which starts at the carpark and one of the lower trails. We had started to worry about connecting with White-bellied Goshawk, as we had birded for 5 days without a sniff of one and knew this was one of the better sites. Fortunately, on the last section of the trail before getting back to the car we heard one calling, which eventually gave stunning views. Typically, just as we had started our drive back and only a few hundred yards from the carpark, a second bird flushed from the side of the road!

January 5th

River Blue NP catching the 7.30 minibuss and birded the section of road between Point Germain & Grand Kaoril. Linda enjoyed another swim in the river to cool off and saw a Goshawk fly over, after a packed lunch we caught the 13.15 minibuss back to Pont Perignon. We birded the area around entrance to the park for an hour or so and had another Goshawk circling overhead! Why did we ever worry about seeing one.

January 6th

This was our day-trip to Lifou, catching the 9.00am flight from Noumea Magenta airport, Lifou airport has a very small café outside the terminal where we bought drinks and sandwiches. When we arrived on Lifou, we eventually met the hire car representative at the airport, but only after a half hour worrying wait. It turned out she has been there looking for us all the time but did not have a board with our names on so we did not know who each other were. We then drove straight to the Hapetra Forest Trail and spent a couple of hours birding this track, seeing all the targets. After cleaning up we drove to the end of the track where there is a beautiful quiet beach where Linda went swimming. We returned to the town of We at around 14.00 but struggled to find anywhere to eat, as a couple of cafés had just closed for the day, eventually finding a small supermarket where we managed to get much-needed cold drinks and food. We then drove a circuit around the north end of the island and walked a section of road between Joking and the airport where we saw several Red-bellied Fruit Doves flying across the road in the evening.

January 7th

We spent the day Chilling around the Monte Dore area

January 8th

Drove a circuit around southern tip of the island, birding and sightseeing, the roads on this part of the island are mainly dirt, crossing several fords, as we had not had much rain we were able to cover this circuit without any issues in our small car but would not like to try it in or after heavy rain.

January 9th

River Blue NP catching the 7.30 minibus and birding the road from Terminus to Grand Kaori. Linda enjoyed her last swim in the river. We caught the 13.25 Minibus back to Pont Perignon.

January 10th

Departed La Tontouta International airport at 8.35

Itinerary

Species List

Wild Turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*)

3 birds on the entrance road to Parc les Grandes Fougères 4/1

Pacific Black Duck (*Anas superciliosa*)

A total of about 50 birds seen on several roadside pools & rivers on the journey to/from the Bourail Grasslands on 4/1. A single flew along the shore of the Blue River NP reservoir on the 9/1. 5 on a reservoir near Réserve naturelle du Pic du Grand Kaori on 8/1

Grey Teal

A total of about 20 birds seen on several roadside pools on the journey to/from the Bourail Grasslands on 4/1.

Satin Swiftlet (*Collocalia uropygialis*)

Noted most days including Lifou.

White-rumped Swiftlet (*Aerodramus spodiopygius*)

Only noted on a couple of dates, but appeared to be the commonest swiftlet on Lifou.

Fan-tailed Cuckoo (*Cacomantis flabelliformis*)

Heard at both Mont Koghi and River Blue NP, with 1 seen at the latter site on the 9/1

Metallic Pigeon (*Columba vitiensis*)

Regularly seen, from the garden at Monte Dore to good forest such as River Blue NP.

Spotted Dove (*Spilopelia chinensis*)

Commonly seen, especially around habitation e.g. Monte Dore

- Red-bellied Fruit Dove (*Ptilinopus greyi*)
Dozens heard and 8 seen on Lifou. 2 seen perched & 6 flying across the road just N of the airport in the evening.
- Cloven-feathered Dove (*Drepanoptila holosericea*)
A single male seen (and heard) from the road, near the entrance to Mont Koghi on 1/1.
- Goliath Imperial Pigeon (*Ducula goliath*)
Commonly heard & regularly seen at both Mont Koghi and River Blue NP. Max 20 in a fruiting tree at Mont Koghi on 1/1
- Buff-banded Rail (*Gallirallus philippensis*)
3 roadside birds on the road to Bourail Grasslands on 4/1. 1 Monte Dore 8/1.
- Australasian Swamphen (*Porphyrio melanotus*)
Several roadside birds on the journey to the Bourail Grasslands and Parc les Grandes Fougères on 4/1
- Australasian Grebe (*Tachybaptus novaehollandiae*)
2 on a small pool near La Foa 4/1 & 2 on a reservoir near Réserve naturelle du Pic du Grand Kaori on 8/1
- Wandering Tattler (*Tringa incana*)
A group of 6 birds seen on the coast during our circuit of the southern tip of the island on 8/1.
- Black Noddy (*Anous minutus*).
Up to 20 birds seen on several occasions off the coast from Monte Dore, twice in “feeding frenzies” with Wedge-tailed Shearwaters.
- Silver Gull (*Chroicocephalus novaehollandiae*)
Several birds seen on the coast around Monte Dore, and on our south coast circuit on 8/1.
- Greater Crested Tern (*Thalasseus bergii*)
Several birds seen on the coast around Monte Dore, and on our south coast circuit on 8/1.
- Kagu (*Rhynochetos jubatus*)
Seen on every visit to River Blue NP, with a maximum of 4 seen in a day. Often seen from the minibus into & out of the reserve. The best area was around Grand Kaori
- Wedge-tailed Shearwater (*Ardenna pacifica*)
Good numbers regularly seen off the coast around Monte Dore, and on our south coast circuit on 8/1.
- Great Frigatebird (*Fregata minor*)
A single immature bird on our south coast circuit on 8/1.
- Little Pied Cormorant (*Microcarbo melanoleucos*)
Recorded on 2 dates on the reservoir at River Blue NP.
- Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*)
2 on a reservoir near Réserve naturelle du Pic du Grand Kaori on 8/1
- Nankeen Night Heron (*Nycticorax caledonicus*)
1 flew over the road at dusk near Monte Dore 29/12 & 2 flew down the river at River Blue NP on 9/1.

White-faced Heron (*Egretta novaehollandiae*)
 Recorded on 3 dates which includes 2 dates on the reservoir at River Blue NP

Pacific Reef Heron (*Egretta sacra*)
 A total of 6 birds: in coastal mangroves near Monte Dore, the journey to Bourail Grasslands on 4/1 and on our south coast circuit on 8/1.

Eastern Osprey (*Pandion cristatus*)
 Seen on 3 dates from the accommodation at Monte Dore, with a max of 3 birds.

White-bellied Goshawk (*Accipiter haplochrous*)
 2 including a very showy perched bird at Parc les Grandes Fougères on 4/1 and 2 at River Blue NP 5/1.

Swamp Harrier (*Circus approximans*)
 Recorded on 6 dates at various locations and often from the car

Whistling Kite (*Haliastur sphenurus*)
 Recorded on 4 dates, which includes several sightings around the reservoir at River Blue NP

Sacred Kingfisher (*Todiramphus sanctus*)
 Recorded on most dates & common on Lifou.

Peregrine (*Falco peregrinus*)
 A pair seen over the garden at Monte Dore.

Horned Parakeet (*Eunymphicus cornutus*)
 Only recorded at River Blue NP. We saw up to 4 birds on 3 mornings whilst waiting for the park to open, in trees just before the barrier at around 6.40. They seem to like feeding in these trees, but were shy and did not hang around. One along the track near Grand Kaori.

New Caledonian Parakeet (*Cyanoramphus saisseti*)
 Seen at River Blue NP (3 dates), Parc les Grandes Fougères and Monte Koghi, although never seen really well. Birds were either in flight, or hidden in foliage.

Coconut Lorikeet (*Trichoglossus haematodus*)
 Commonly seen, even in towns.

New Caledonian Myzomela (*Myzomela caledonica*)
 Small numbers seen at all main sites

Cardinal Myzomela (*Myzomela cardinalis*)
 8+ birds seen on Lifou

Grey-eared Honeyeater (*Lichmera incana*)
 Numerous and vocal, the sound of New Caledonia

New Caledonian Friarbird (*Philemon diemenensis*)
 Fairly common at River Blue NP. Vocal & inquisitive.

Crow Honeyeater (*Gymnomyza aubryana*)
 Only seen on our first visit to River Blue NP: Found by Linda whilst sheltering from the rain under the bus shelter at Grand Kaori. Almost certainly heard at Grand Kaori on our last visit to the park as well.

Barred Honeyeater (*Glycifohia undulata*)
 Regularly recorded in small numbers at Mont Koghi & River Blue NP.

Fan-tailed Gerygone (*Gerygone flavolateralis*)
 Common – recorded regularly, even around our accommodation.

- White-breasted Woodswallow (*Artamus leucorhynchus*)
Fairly common throughout.
- South Melanesian Cuckooshrike (*Coracina caledonica*)
Seen regularly at all main sites and on Lifou.
- New Caledonian Cuckooshrike (*Edolisoma anale*)
Only recorded at River Blue NP, seen on 3 of the 4 visits (distinctive call)
- Long-tailed Triller (*Lalage leucopyga*)
A single in a fruiting tree at Mont Koghi, 1 in scrub along the entrance road to River Blue NP, 1 at the Thicketbird site & 2 on Lifou.
- New Caledonian Whistler (*Pachycephala caledonica*)
Small numbers seen on each visit to River Blue NP, Parc les Grandes Fougères and Monte Koghi,
- Rufous Whistler (*Pachycephala rufiventris*)
Small numbers seen at River Blue NP, Parc les Grandes Fougères, Monte Koghi and in our garden at Monte Dore. Seems to prefer more open habitat to NC Whistler.
- Grey Fantail (*Rhipidura albiscapa*)
Small numbers seen at River Blue NP, Monte Koghi and in our garden at Monte Dore.
- Streaked Fantail (*Rhipidura verreauxi*)
Small numbers seen at River Blue NP, Parc les Grandes Fougères, Monte Koghi
- Southern Shrikebill (*Clytorhynchus pachycephaloides*).
1 single bird on the trails at Monte Koghi on our first visit and was the only one seen all trip.
- Melanesian Flycatcher (*Myiagra caledonica*)
Only recorded at River Blue NP, with a pair seen regularly around Grand Kaori.
- New Caledonian Crow (*Corvus moneduloides*)
Seen on every visit to River Blue NP. There seemed to be two groups in the Grand Kaori to Point Germain section of the road, with one group nearly always present around Grand Kaori. Also recorded at the Thicketbird site & our circuit around the south of the island.
- Yellow-bellied Flyrobin (*Cryptomicroeca flaviventris*)
Seen on every visit to River Blue NP, also along the trails at Monte Koghi, on our first visit and along the Mont Dore Corniche Sud Trail, close to our accommodation
- Red-vented Bulbul (*Pycnonotus cafer*)
Occasionally seen around inhabited areas such as Mont Dore
- Welcome Swallow
1 flew over the coast road near Mont Dore
- New Caledonian Thicketbird (*Cincloramphus mariae*)
A single bird seen at PePe's Thicketbird Site (Bourail Grassland) - see notes under itinerary
- Small Lifou White-eye (*Zosterops minutus*)
Commonly seen on Lifou.
- Green-backed White-eye (*Zosterops xanthochroa*)
Commonly seen (not Lifou)

Silvereye (*Zosterops lateralis*)

We only saw this species on Lifou, where the dark headed *melanops* race occurs (potential split?)

Large Lifou White-eye (*Zosterops inornatus*)

A surprisingly tricky and skulking species. We only saw a single bird but heard at least half a dozen along the Hapetra Forest road. After several attempts a bird finally flew in to a played call, it sat on a close open branch for about 20 seconds before flying back into cover and not showing itself again.

Striated Starling (*Aplonis striata*)

Seen on every visit to River Blue NP, around the entrance to Monte Koghi and on our southern circuit of the island.

Common Myna (*Acridotheres tristis*)

See regularly, particularly around inhabited areas.

House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*)

See regularly, around towns etc.

Common Waxbill (*Estrilda astrild*)

Seen on several occasion around Mont Dore – including in the garden.

Red-throated Parrotfinch (*Erythrura psittacea*)

One of my favourite families: Seen at Mont Dore Corniche Sud Trail, River Blue NP – in particular the area around Vieux Refuge & the Thicketbird site.

Chestnut-breasted Mannikin (*Lonchura castaneothorax*)

Recorded around the garden at Mont Dore on several occasions.



White-bellied Goshawk (*Accipiter haplochrous*)



New Caledonian Thicketbird (*Cincloramphus mariae*)



Red-throated Parrotfinch (*Erythrura psittacea*)

New Caledonian Crow (*Corvus moneduloides*)-with tool



New Caledonian Myzomela (*Myzomela caledonica*)

Cardinal Myzomela (*Myzomela cardinalis*)



Crow Honeyeater (*Gymnomyza aubryana*).

Yellow-bellied Flyrobin (*Cryptomicroeca flaviventris*)



Red-bellied Fruit Dove (*Ptilinopus greyi*)



New Caledonian Friarbird (*Philemon diemenensis*)