

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

from 15/09 to 16/10 2014

Hervé and Noëlle JACOB

hnjacob@gmail.com

We joined 4 friends (Eva & Maurice Sempé, Serge Nicolle and Frédéric Pelsy) who had organised a 2 weeks tour for 6 persons, and contacted us when 2 of them cancelled. They had asked to Sicklebill to organise the tour without their official guiding, but booking the local guides, the flights and the accommodations, all this was sub-contracted by PNG Holidays. The total for 14 days was of 3230€/pers + 850€/pers for internal flights, so 4080€/pers without the international flight.

After these 2 weeks we organised 2 weeks more by ourselves for 4 of us who wanted to stay longer : 8 nights in New Britain, 3 nights near Varirata NP, then we flew just the 2 of us to Madang and spent 2 nights in Madang and 3 nights at the Keki lodge. This 2nd part costed us 2700€/pers.

We used Petri Hottola's very good reports.

The purpose of this short report is to help the independant birders to organise themselves their PNG trip, and skip the money paid to the intermediary (although there is no complain to have about Sicklebill); it will be expensive for all that, but a little bit less, because they'll be able to choose cheaper accommodations, and maybe avoid the full board, paying less for the meals when choosing only 1 plate. The flights can be booked online with Airlines PNG and Air Nuigini.

We think that we were too late in the season, the birds were not responding to tape, and in october many species were nesting. Anyway the activity seem generally low, the birds are shy, hunted. All the sites are well covered in the different reports with their birdlists, so we don't give the details of our sightings unless useful.

We saw a total of 330 species during our whole trip, of which 153 endemics.

VARIRATA NP

We stayed at the luxurious Raintree lodge, 1 hour from the national park (due to the road construction, it should be less (45mn) when finished). We saw the Granville Motel near the airport which should be really cheaper and more convenient (that's where Jon Hornbuckle stays); the hotel has a facebook page. We were guided by Daniel Wakra who is very expensive, -although we don't know how much we paid as it was included in the package-, came late our first day, allowing us to bird only 3 hours, and spent the 2 more days mostly sleeping because he was sick (he said malaria). He would have sent another guide to replace him, we would have appreciated.

At the end of our trip, after New Britain, we went to the park again, but this time we had booked at the good **Sogeri Lodge** sogerilodge@global.net.pg which is just 10mn (6km) from the park, 1km after the junction of the road. The waypoint on Google Earth : lat -9.424466° long 147.400672°. Here there are rooms with shared bathrooms at 250k, with bathrooms at 350k, or the appartement that we had for 4 of us with a kitchen at 450k (can contain 6 persons). The restaurant is good, and there is a small shop; the lift to or from the airport is 30k/pers, and the wayback lift for the park is 20k/pers. It is not cheap but it is cheaper than many hotels of Port Moresby and much more convenient. There was another new hotel 300m beyond, the **Kokoda Trail Hotel**, it can be rewarding to check their website and ask their rates. The national park entrance is 5k/pers.

This Sogeri lodge is the base for the trekkers of the Kokoda trail, so it can be very busy at times. Note that it is possible to bird the track beyond the hotel, leading to the river; here the *Grand Mannikins* were seen by our friend Serge.

When we went to the park, Alfred, the hotel's manager, asked to a guide from the park, Robert, to stay with us; he said that he would feel more comfortable if we were escorted, so we accepted. Robert's house is 2km before the park entrance, and he takes 50k for half day, 70k full day. He doesn't know the birds as Daniel Wakra does, but he knows some of them, and has a few informations. At least for the first days it is a good idea to be with him because there are

several trails and no map. Once you know them you can go alone, but it is better to avoid the week-ends because there are visitors.

Our surprise was to see the well maintained picnic sites, and that it is possible to camp, there are shelters, toilets. There is even a basic accomodation where it is possible to stay for 20k/pers. It can be organised by Alfred from the Sogeri, we suppose that staying inside with Robert should be rewarding, and it is a beautiful park; we saw 97 species there.

PAU (Pacific Adventist University)

It is a very nice place to bird, on the road to Varirata. There is an entry fee of 10k/pers. As we had a morning left before our flight to Mt Hagen, and Daniel Wakra being sick, we contacted Leonard Vaieke (vaieke@gmail.com tel 7044 6293), a very sympathic birding guide who took us with a bus and driver to the PAU for 220k (negociated without guiding). If you stay at Sogeri lodge, they can stop you there on the way to or from Port Moresby. Many birds on the ponds and the Papuan Frogmouth on nest behind the tennis court WP -9.406561° 147.271632°.

MT HAGEN – KUMUL LODGE

We landed at Mount Hagen, and the bus sent by the Kumul Lodge was waiting for us. It is at about 1 hour's drive. At the lodge we had a bungalow, but they have cheaper rooms and all can be arranged in advance through their website, and they list the price of all their tours. It is probably better to book the room and the airport transfer in advance, and book the tours once at the lodge, and probably bargain a little bit. As the taxi rates are the most expensive part of the trip, it is cheaper for groups. For the *Lesser BOP* or the *Torrent Flyrobin* trip, as it is along the road you don't really mind if you are alone or with a group. There are several birding sites, we preferred the Pigites because we walked in the forest, and the trail near the hotel (where you can bird alone), because the other places were just waiting posts along the road.

Near the hotel there is also the Max's trail, owing to the guide, and leading to his house. We think that it is better to bargain the visit straight with him once at the hotel, because they charge a lot but very few goes to the guide. If you want to call him in advance and see what he can organise for you, his has 2 phone n° : (675) 7117 6894 and 7175 3083. He may arrange things for a cheaper price.

The last morning we went to another promising trail were we only heard the 2 BOPs (Blue and Superb). We went for birding at 5:30am but when there was some driving time we think that 5am would have increased our chances; and breakfast service was often slow.

We spent 3 nights and it was definitely not enough, we missed the *Blue BOP*, *Superb BOP*, *Lesser BOP*, *Princess Stephanie's Astrapia* and the *Mountain Nightjar*...

TABUBIL/KIUNGA/KWATU LODGE

For these 3 sites Samuel was the guide, he owns Kiunga Nature Tours and can be contacted through www.kiunganaturetours.com. He was a nice man, but not always very enthusiastic; maybe a little bit saturated, it was the end of the birding season... Lamik was a good driver.

-Tabubil is a pleasant town, and we stayed 2 nights at the Cloudlands Hotel in a room with aircon, but we saw that they have cheaper rooms, probably with fan only, so it is better to know that before. The meals were not included in the price of the room, and were a little bit pricey but the pizzas were a good deal. Breakfasts are healthy so we kept some cakes and had breakfast in our room the 2nd day.

We birded 2 sites, one is above a river for the Salvadori's Teal, another at the end of a road with good view on the forest. It is sad that Samuel told us only the 2nd day that the Papuan Boobook was around the hotel's garden, so we missed our chance the first night; the bird did not call the 2nd evening, we heard it at dawn the last day but it didn't come to the tape.

-Kiunga is another town that we joined by car from Tabubil within a few hours; here we stayed 3 nights at Kiunga Guesthouse, here again we could probably get cheaper rooms. It can be wise to ask the price straight to the hotel through their Facebook page and see if there is difference when it is booked by Samuel.

Two birding sites, one on a small trail at KM17 for King and Greater BOPs, another along a road (to Boystown) with good views from a platform (*Flame Bowerbird, Hook-billed Kingfisher...*).

-Kwatu lodge

A basic accommodation in the forest along the Elevala river. From Kiunga we boarded a small boat and had a nice trip and birdwatching until the lodge; we stopped at a riverine village to board a girl who was our cook; she didn't seem very happy and during 2 days she didn't speak to us; the food was rather limited.

A guide called Jimmy joined us. We went out for birding after dinner, but a terrible storm forced us to come back. The second night we tried again, we just had the time to find a Marbled Frogmouth, then it rained and we had to give up. Sure, 2 nights are not enough for the site; we saw another new accommodation not very far along the river, it would have been nice to spend some time here too. We had many boat rides, and there are good trails in the forest; we couldn't go to the *NG Flightless Rail's* hide because it was flooded.

KEKI LODGE NEAR MADANG

It is really a great birding place where we spent 3 nights (but deserves 1 week), even if we missed the main target : the *Fire-maned Bowerbird*, who was probably nesting so didn't come to the clearing as he normally does. We saw few birds, but only new and beautiful ones. The Magnificent BPO is seen displaying from the hide; just read what Birdquest can see in their report and you'll know the interest of the place.

Robert McKay, who lived in PNG and knows Moyang assured us that it was possible to organise this trip and gave us Moyang's tel. The problem was to know the final price for our stay, it was not clear. First we booked our flights, and a room in Madang for the night before the visit to Keki and the night following it; it is better to do that way, in case of impossibility to get back down for any reason (mainly weather). We booked the cheapest room at Madang Lodge (55€ with shared bathroom) on hotels.com, they have a free shuttle service for the airport. At the airport we saw a publicity for CWA Guesthouse, probably much cheaper : madang.cwa@global.net.pg

In Madang Moyang called us and said that he would pick us up the following morning at 9am; he was there with a 4x4, the driver and the owner of the car, who was going up there for the first time. The main problem for Moyang is the access to his lodge, there are 100km on a tarred road, but then 25km of track, the second part being very difficult when it rains. Moyang has to fix the road himself or pay guys to do it; and he has to rent a jeep (we paid 1100 kinas one way); for us it was OK, the jeep could drive until 2km before the lodge, when it began to rain, and we finished on foot.

The lodge is simple but good, with chairs on terraces overlooking the clearing; there are good trails in the forest; the price is 80k/pers/night, meals cooked by Moyang's wife 55k/pers/day, guiding 70k/pers, blind fee 40k/pers, birding fee 50k/pers. When he called us, Moyang said that the total was 2200k for the car and 2180k for him for our 3 days. To that Moyang added his personal expenses in Madang (his lodging, food, telephone) : 300k (included in the 2180). As he wanted the payment in advance, at least for the car, we transferred the money on his account at the BSP office of Port Moresby airport. So the total was high as you can see. We think that the next time, we'll pay a part in advance, and give to Moyang his money once we'll know how many times he guided us and how many times we used the blinds, because that was not done everyday.

Moyang is very nice, and we enjoyed our stay, we just have to go back there!

NEW BRITAIN

Thanks to Petri Hottola's report, we booked a bungalow for 4 persons at the Mahonia Na Dari through the website, a research center next to the Walindi Plantation Resort. For 8 nights we paid 3260\$US the bungalow. It is better to pay by cash, to avoid the 4% charged by the Walindi if you pay by CB at their desk (for covering the transfer to the Mahonia account). There is a kitchen and a fridge in the bungalow, and we bought some food in Kimbe's supermarkets. Budget has no more cars to rent in Kimbe, and Hertz had no unlimited km. We rent with Ireland Car Hire sales.irelandhirecar@gmail.com, very reactive; we paid 660 kinas/day a Toyota Landcruiser with free km. Allan, the manager, was waiting for us at the airport, we stopped at his house in Kimbe for the payment, but his credit card terminal didn't accept the cards, so we

went to the ATM for cash. Then we followed him until the Mahonia Na Dari, which is about 40mn from Kimbe, just before the Walindi Resort, but with a non-obvious entrance track (-5.440497° 150.086036°). We were warmly welcome by Nelly. Allan is very nice and helpful; as we didn't know where was Pokili forest, he asked some informations and drove us there for free (2 hours drive), an occasion for him to do some tourism.

We birded several sites, and booked a pelagic trip with Walindi Resort (860\$). Frédéric had well studied the descriptions given by Hottola and we could find the sites without problems, except Pokili forest that Allan found for us. We had a useful Garmin GPS 64ST using BirdEye map which was accurate. We saw 91 species, too many were nesting and quiet.

-Numundo Grasslands : lat -5.505670° long 150.088333°. A zone of grasslands with cattle, where we stopped several times. We flushed many *Blue-breasted Quails* and *Swinhoe's Snipes*, saw the *Buff-bellied Mannikins* and more.

-Davialu Bridge : -5.548735° 150.018012°. A good place to stand for birding; we went there several times, but many trucks use this bridge; all the locals were very friendly and greeted us. Waiting from the bridge is good, but there is a trail on the left before it, then a path on the right leading to a small platform along the river, a good place. We heard the *New Britain Pitta* (split of Red-bellied) after the bridge, but couldn't see it; beware of crocodiles.

-Tili Forest : -5.558371° 150.068724° (road entrance -5.530731° 150.099609°). The gravel road passes through a patch of forest which was productive, it is the only site where we found the *Finch's Imperial-pigeon*. We saw 2 *White-mantled Kingfishers*, *Black-tailed Monarch* heard only; we went there 2 times.

-Garu Forest : -5.488678° 149.98510°. A 8kms track in the forest where we went 2 times, stopping at several points and walking; hard birding here too, but you can't hope better place to bird, there was very few trucks. Towards the end of the forest there were hot water rivers, and after the local were digging for the scrubfowls's eggs.

-Kilu Ridge : -5.400218° 150.057625°. This site is about 6km north of Mahonia Na Dari, after Patanga. We parked at the entrance of the concrete track, at WP -5.386642° 150.068758°, and walked up to the village; don't do that, when we came back 2 tires had been deflated, and we had to call Allan who came to repair. The villagers said that we should have left the car upthere. So we joined the village after 600m, where all unhabitants seemed happy to see us, and quickly a group of guys followed us with curiosity, and then guided us; we continued the track straight for about 1,5km until the forest. There we took right, and the group stayed with us, we thought that our chances to find something were very thin due to their noise; anyway they were so friendly and funny that it was a nice experience, and we managed to see 2 *Black-capped Paradise-Kingfishers* and 2 *White-mantled Kingfishers*. After sharing biscuits with our friends and showing them some birds in the telescope, one of them climbed to a coconut tree and took some nuts down, it was hot and we appreciated that!

-Pokili Forest : -5.60131° 150.59744°. Allan drove us there, it took about 3 hours to get to the forest. Along the road we crossed a village called Malalia (-5.44043 150.50351) where we saw 2 guesthouses which seemed rather new, with aircon, one was called Lalage Guesthouse, and it should be wise to stay here to be close to the site. Allan could probably help you for this. At the last village before the forest, Allan asked something to the villagers and a young guy came with us; it was a long and promising track into the forest, but sadly we saw very few. We drove until a trail, parked and walked until the place where the Scrubfowls lay their eggs, many people were collecting them, and the scrubfowls where flying everywhere. Then we continued until a volcanic area where mud was boiling in the ground holes and followed the trail (a loop) back to the main track. We were disappointed to see so few birds, anyway we saw many scrubfowls, and chicks, and we are sure that this place has to be birded several times, probably earlier in the season.

LAST NEWS FROM KEKI LODGE

The 23rd of august 2016, we had a phone call from Moyang Okira (00 675 7162 6714), who said that the track leading to Keki lodge is now good all the way until the lodge, wich is a good news.

Don't miss this site, Moyang and his family are very nice.

Noëlle & Hervé Jacob