New Caledonia Birding Update October 2014

19 to 27 October 2014
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Logistics
My wife and I flew Qantas direct from Sydney to Noumea and return. A relatively short and comfortable flight, made better by the return journey being paid for with points. We rented a car from Europcar with pick-up and return at the airport. This worked seamlessly with internet booking. From a limited survey of the cars available at the airport Europcar offered the best rates at the time I booked.

We stayed initially for 3 nights in Farino north of the airport at Lodge Terre de Soleil (lodgeterredesoliel@gmail.com). This wonderful accommodation has 4 cabins which are very new and comfortable. It is run by Frank and Natalie who are extremely pleasant and speak enough English to allow good conversations despite our knowing no French. Natalie’s cooking provided us with by far our best meals in New Caledonia. Lodge Terre de Soleil was booked on the internet. It is about 13 Km from Parc les Grandes Fougeres but is itself surrounded by forest and has plenty of birds around. While not the cheapest option this Lodge was excellent in every way. We even heard Kagu in the forest before dawn from our cabin.

We subsequently had 5 nights at Hotel Le Parc close to Anse Vata beach in Noumea. This was a fairly conventional 3 star hotel but offered rooms on the internet at a comparatively reasonable cost. We bought croissants and made coffee in our room for breakfast and ate our evening meals at a variety of restaurants around the hotel. While many earlier reports suggest that New Caledonia is very expensive we found that the costs were very comparable with what we would expect to pay in Sydney for similar quality food and lodging.

Rather than buy a bird guide I made up a booklet of pictures and diagnostic features of the desired species from the internet. I downloaded all of the calls, with the exception of Crow Honeyeater, from Xeno Canto.

Birding locations
Parc Les Grandes Fougeres
This relatively new national Park is very well set up with good signage, well made paths and quite plentiful birds. It is very easy to find being well signposted from Farino onwards. The road from Farino is initially sealed but the last 4 Km is well graded dirt. There is a large parking area just past the entrance gate. The park is closed on Tuesdays I believe.

The park is closed on Tuesdays. The cost is 400 francs with a 50% reduction for those over 65. The park opens at 7:30 am and the last entry is 4:30 pm. On entering the park one is given a map of which the following is an extract. The park ranger we spoke to suggested that the track to La Banion was the best place for the Kagu. He also suggested that along the road to the west of the parking area was best for Thicketbird – though interestingly he did not recognise the picture of the bird I had but did recognise the call! This bit of road is bounded on the high side by a dense stand of high seed bearing grass.

Apart from a toilet there are no facilities here so bring food and drinks as required. We headed down to La Banion and about 2/3rd of the way down a family of 5 Kagu appeared within 30m of us. They were fairly wary and skirted around us keeping their distance. At the bottom of the hill we stopped to admire the creek and suddenly found that a sub-adult kagu was following us down the track. It very nonchalantly fed alongside the creek for around 20 minutes. After climbing up the other side of the valley we walked...
along the track beside the tall grasses. We heard a Thicketbird calling but were unable to get any sort of a sighting.

Birds seen in Parc Les Grandes Fougere included:

- Kagu
- Metallic Pigeon
- New Caledonian Parakeet
- New Caledonian Myzomela
- Fan-tailed Gerygone
- Southern Shrikebill
- Melanesian Flycatcher
- New Caledonian Crow
- Yellow-bellied Fly-robin
- New Caledonian Thicketbird (H)
- Green-backed White-eye

Area suggested for Thicketbird. Heard 1 bird.

Saw family of 5 Kagu and 1 sub-adult Kagu in this area.
La Foa
This town is on the main road north from the Airport. One passes through it on the way to Farino. There are shops and a service station here so food and other supplies can be picked up here. The best birdwatching spot appears to be the sculpture garden/park immediately behind the Information Centre which is on the only significant bend in the main road north as it passes through the town of La Foa. There is also a lake on the left as one travels north from La Foa which has water birds on it.
Birds seen at the park and elsewhere around La Foa included:-
  Grey-eared Honeyeater
  South-Melanesian Cuckoo-shrike
  Grey Fantail
  Green-backed White-eye
  Common Waxbill
  Red-throated Parrot-finch

Terre de Soliel
Birding from the verandah of our cabin and along the road running past the accommodation was quite productive. Birds seen included:-
  Metallic Pigeon
  Glossy Swiftlet
  New Caledonian Friarbird
  Barred Honeyeater
  South Melanesian Cuckooshrike
  New Caledonian Crow
  Yellow-bellied Flyrobin
  Green-backed White-eye
  Striated Starling

Circular drive from La Foa to Canala, Thio, Boulparis and back to la Foa
This provided a scenic drive to the East coast of the island. A part of the road between Canala and Thio is very narrow and traffic is restricted to travelling one way with the direction of permitted travel changing each hour. Birds seen included:-
  New Caledonian Myzomela
  Red-throated parrotfinch
  Rufous Whistler

Sentier de la Petit Cascade
This is a nice walk which starts at the well known accommodation Refuge de Farino, which is also quite close to Parc Les Grandes Fougeres.
Birds seen on this walk included:-
  Streaked Fantail
  Cloven–feathered Dove
  Chestnut-breasted Mannikin

Anse Varta
Our hotel in Noumea was in the area of the Anse Varta beach. The only notable bird was White-rumped Swiftlet frequently seen whizzing past our hotel balcony.

Lifou
I took a 6:00 am flight from the domestic airport at Magenta (an inner suburb of Noumea) to the island of Lifou arriving at 6:40 am. I returned on the 2:30 pm flight which allowed very adequate time to see the local specialties with the exception of the Large Lifou
White-eye. I did note that flights booked out quite early and it is advisable to book internal flights well ahead of your visit.

From the airport I walked along the bituminised road leading south. Within 500 m I heard birds calling from the bush on the right hand side of the road. I pushed into the scrub here and quickly picked up

- Small Lifou White-eye
- Silvereye (the distinctive and delightful black faced race)
- Cardinal Myzomela
- Long–tailed Triller
- Red-bellied Fruit Dove

I then walked to the end of that stretch of road and around the corner to the Right. On the Left hand side of the road I noticed an indistinct track which I followed into relatively dense forest. I saw many of the birds previously seen and caught sight of a different bird that might well have been a Large Lifou White-eye but it was gone in an instant and I did not get a good enough view to tick the bird. I then returned along the track walked further along the main road turning off into dense forest from time to time but was unable to get a sight of the Large Lifou White-eye.

**Parc de la Riviere Bleue**

I had previously made contact with Jean-Marc Meriot (jean-marc.meriot@province-sud.nc), the director of the park, to enquire as to whether he would be available for guiding on one of the days we would be in New Caledonia. He promptly advised that he was available on only one day and was guiding another couple but that we could join them. This worked out brilliantly as Jean-Mark proved to be most pleasant and knowledgeable.

We left Noumea leaving ourselves 1.5 hours to get to the park to meet Jean-Marc. As it turned out the road seems to have been improved recently and it took us less than 1 hour to get there in the early morning. We met Jean-Marc and the other birders at the ticket office and we each travelled in our own cars to the damaged bridge that vehicles are not allowed to cross. We then walked across the bridge and all got into a park service vehicle whch Jean-Marc drove. It is quite some way from the bridge to the forest through very dry
grassland. Once into the forest we stopped regularly and scouted for birds. Jean-Marc used a tape player a lot of the time and, to my ear at least, at incredibly high volume. It was contrary to conventional wisdom but was amazingly effective. We were quickly taken to a family of Kagu that had a 10 day old chick. There were 2 mature adult birds in the group and 2 or 3 sub-adult birds which still had brown patches in the wings. These were presumably chicks from previous years that had not yet left the family. One adult rushed at us with crest raised and wings ajar. In all during the day we saw 5 separate individual Kagu or family groups.

Above : Parent Kagu in aggression display for protection of chick.
Left : Parent Kagu with 10 day old chick at its feet.

Jean-Marc was particularly keen to find us a Crow Honeyeater and played its call loudly and frequently as we made our way back down the track towards the bridge. In the very last patch of forest before the dry country his efforts were rewarded when a Crow Honeyeater alighted in a nearby tree and called back. It only stayed for a few seconds but Jean-Marc managed to relocate it for longer viewing.

Birds seen in Parc de la Riviere Bleue included :-
Kagu
Goliath Imperial Pigeon
Cloven-feathered Dove
Horned Parakeet
New Caledonian Parakeet
New Caledonian Myzomela
Grey-eared Honeyeater
Crow Honeyeater
New Caledonian Friarbird
Fan-tailed Gerygone
South Melanesian Cuckooshrike
New Caledonian Cuckooshrike
New Caledonian Whistler
Streaked Fantail
Southern Shrikebill
Green-backed White-eye

**Additional Sites**
We visited Mt Koghis briefly. The restaurant appears to be back in operation. We walked into the forest past the flying-fox adventure park but only had time for a look. The area used to be known for Thicketbird but there did not appear to be much suitable habitat now. We had also hoped for White-bellied Goshawk but were disappointed (again).

We took a day trip out to Amadee Island on the outside of the lagoon. It was a well organized and pleasant day out which yielded a few common sea birds.

**Summary**
A week provided plenty of time to get a good list of the New Caledonia’s special birds as well as doing a few touristic things. The two national parks we visited plus Lifou would give the visitor a reasonable chance of seeing substantially all the special birds. Driving is easy and roads are good, as is accommodation. The number of birds is very manageable for a self guided trip although I very much appreciated the help of Jean-Marc Meriot in Parc de la Riviere Bleue. Lifou is easy to do in a half day.

**Complete list of birds seen in New Caledonia**

- Pacific Black Duck [sp] (Anas superciliosa)
- Hardhead (Aythya australis)
- White-faced Heron (Egretta novaehollandiae)
- Eastern Osprey (Pandion cristatus)
- Brown Goshawk (Accipiter fasciatus)
- Swamp Harrier (Circus approximans)
- Whistling Kite (Haliastur sphenurus)
- Kagu (Rhynochetos jubatus)
- Buff-banded Rail (Gallirallus philippensis)
- Purple Swamphen (Porphyrio porphyrio)
- Pacific Golden Plover (Pluvialis fulva)
- Ruddy Turnstone ( Arenaria interpres)
- Black Noddy (Anous minutus)
- Silver Gull (Chroicocephalus novaehollandiae)
- Fairy Tern (Sternula nereis)
- Black-naped Tern (Sterna sumatrana)
- Metallic Pigeon (Columba vitiensis)
- Spotted Dove (Spilopelia chinensis)
- Pacific Emerald Dove (Chalcophaps longirostris)
- Red-bellied Fruit Dove (Ptilinopus greyi)
- Cloven-feathered Dove (Drepanoptila holosericea)
- Goliath Imperial Pigeon (Ducula goliath)
- Fan-tailed Cuckoo (Cacomantis flabelliformis)
- Glossy Swiftlet (Collocalia esculenta)
- White-rumped Swiftlet (Aerodramus spodiopygius)
- Sacred Kingfisher (Todiramphus sanctus)
- Coconut Lorikeet (Trichoglossus haematodus)
- Horned Parakeet (Eunymphicus cornutus)
New Caledonian Parakeet (Cyanoramphus saisseti)
New Caledonian Myzomela (Myzomela caledonica)
Cardinal Myzomela (Myzomela cardinalis)
Grey-eared Honeyeater (Lichmera incana)
New Caledonian Friarbird (Philemon diemenensis)
Crow Honeyeater (Gymnomyza aubryana)
Barred Honeyeater (Glycifohia undulata)
Fan-tailed Gerygone (Gerygone flavolateralis)
White-breasted Woodswallow (Artamus leucorynchus)
South Melanesian Cuckooshrike (Coracina caledonica)
New Caledonian Cuckooshrike (Coracina analis)
Long-tailed Triller (Lalage leucopyga)
New Caledonian Whistler (Pachycephala caledonica)
Rufous Whistler (Pachycephala rufiventris)
Grey Fantail (Rhipidura albiscapa)
Streaked Fantail (Rhipidura verreauxi)
Southern Shrikebill (Clytorhynchus pachycephaloides)
Melanesian Flycatcher (Myiagra caledonica)
New Caledonian Crow (Corvus moneduloides)
Yellow-bellied Flyrobin (Microeca flaviventris)
Red-vented Bulbul (Pycnonotus cafer)
Welcome Swallow (Hirundo neoxena)
Tree Martin (Petrochelidon nigricans)
Small Lifou White-eye (Zosterops minutus)
Green-backed White-eye (Zosterops xanthochroa)
Silvereye (Zosterops lateralis)
Striated Starling (Aplonis striata)
Common Myna (Acridotheres tristis)
Common Starling (Sturnus vulgaris)
House Sparrow (Passer domesticus)
Common Waxbill (Estrilda astrild)
Red-throated Parrotfinch (Erythrura psittacea)
Chestnut-breasted Mannikin (Lonchura castaneothorax)