

NEW CALEDONIA 2008

August 10, 2008 to August 19, 2008

Guided by
Phil Gregory

New Caledonia 2008 was another very successful and enjoyable tour, with a few surprises this time and much better weather than in some previous years, maybe too nice as the lack of strong winds reduced seabird sightings!

The two days in Blue River NP were super, with yet again some outstanding experiences with the Kagu, finding at least 8 birds on the first day. Seeing a male spreading his wings and erecting the long crest was just magical. Cloven-feathered Dove here was a good bonus, as was White-throated Pigeon on the way to the park, both species we usually see later in the trip. Both Horned and New Caledonian Parakeet showed really well, and Lesser Shrikebill made a late appearance on the first day.

Day two saw us find 3 individual White-bellied Goshawk as we came near the park, with great perched views, then a super Red-throated Parrotfinch before the marathon for the Crow Honeyeater continued- the song will be etched into everyone's subconscious I'm sure, but amazingly it was pishing which finally brought this rare and difficult to find species into view-yay! A Peregrine Falcon by the hotel in Noumea was a new island species for Phil too and made a nice start to the day.

The day trip to Ouvea worked out well, though the local guide's car ran out of fuel and we all had to squash up into one pick-up on the way back, all part of the cultural experience! The endemic Ouvea Parakeet showed brilliantly, and we added Red-bellied Fruit-Dove, Fan-tailed Cuckoo, Golden Whistler, and Cardinal Myzomela, though seabirds were just the inshore terns and noddies this year due to the calm conditions.

Mont Koghis was very rewarding, and in beautiful conditions for once and Horned Parakeet, Cloven-feathered Dove, White-throated Pigeon and Barred Honeyeater made it very pleasing. Sadly the small city park we visit has become very degraded, and the only addition here was Chestnut-breasted Munia, although a Nankeen Night-Heron had managed to evade the slingshots and gave good views. A lunch stop by the jardin zoologique added Zebra Dove, a new addition to the island avifauna and one that is clearly well-established now, as we saw them again later in the north.

Lifou is another lovely island, and with a super hotel, but the old adage about the nicer the hotel the shorter the stay came true, as Air Caledonie really mucked us about and we had a 5 hour wait for the flight, which was then very nearly cancelled due to an exhausted steward! Luckily they bribed or blackmailed him into working so we eventually made it. Good birds on Lifou were more Cardinal Myzomelas and Red-bellied Fruit-Doves, Small Lifou White-eye, a long battle with Large Lifou White-eye, which resulted in glimpses only, despite it singing really close by, and fantastic daylight Pacific Barn Owl perched on the fence at the airport. A Nankeen Kestrel here was another good find too, this being a rare visitor to the islands.

The last day up at Farino saw us see more Horned Parakeet, New Cal Crow, Red-throated Parrotfinch and White-bellied Goshawk, with a couple of Cattle Egret on the way back being another unusual species here.

My thanks to the group for good company and good spotting, to Teresa at the Field Guides office for good logistics, to Flor and Charlotte at Arc en Ciel for great ground work, and to Jean-Marc the chief warden at Blue River who was commendably patient with us and our need for the birds.

Why not join us for 2009, it's a great short tour with a nice range of endemic, and a lovely island to enjoy. Phil Gregory, Kuranda.

List total: 75 bird taxa and 1 mammal taxa

*If marked to left of list, * = heard only, I = introduced, E = endemic,
N = nesting, a = austral migrant, b = boreal migrant*

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Sulidae

BROWN BOOBY (*Sula leucogaster*)

A few folks saw this off the Point on Ouvea.

Phalacrocoracidae

LITTLE PIED CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax melanoleucos*)

Small numbers at a few wetlands.

Ardeidae

WHITE-FACED HERON (*Egretta novaehollandiae*)

A fairly new immigrant and now quite widespread on the island.

PACIFIC REEF-HERON (*Egretta sacra*)

A few dark phase birds around Noumea and on Ouvea.

CATTLE EGRET (*Bubulcus ibis coromanda*)

Two birds at some small ponds near Savannah en route back to Noumea. It's a scarce migrant here and was a NC tick for Phil.

RUFIOUS NIGHT-HERON (*Nycticorax caledonicus caledonicus*)

A few adults in the mangroves and at the small park, all of the nominate race with the white plumes.

Anatidae

GRAY TEAL (*Anas gracilis*)

A few at the mangrove boardwalk and in the small park.

PACIFIC BLACK DUCK (*Anas superciliosa*)

A few at the city park and near Blue River.

Pandionidae

OSPREY (*Pandion haliaetus*)

*This is now a split as Eastern Osprey *Pandion cristatus*, Clements will no doubt eventually catch up. It's the same taxon in Australia and PNG too.*

Accipitridae

WHISTLING KITE (*Haliastur sphenurus*)

A few at Blue River.

SWAMP HARRIER (*Circus approximans*)

A few single birds about at Blue River and Farino.

BROWN GOSHAWK (*Accipiter fasciatus*)

Some folks saw this on Ouvea, then there was a great perched bird at Lifou by the airport there.

E NEW CALEDONIA (WHITE-BELLIED) GOSHAWK (*Accipiter haplochrous*)

This can be elusive, but we did really well and had great looks at Blue River and Farino, with close perched individuals. Curiously I managed to squeak it in twice at Farino when trying for the grassbird!

Falconidae

AUSTRALIAN (NANKEEN) KESTREL (*Falco cenchroides*)

One perched on a light post at Lifou airport was a good find of a rare irruptive migrant here.

PEREGRINE FALCON (*Falco peregrinus*)

*A huge adult female was hunting over the wooded hillside opposite the hotel in Noumea, a site I had been told about before but where I had never seen the bird. They are rare in New Caledonia and this was a really good pick-up. This is the race *nesiotes*, endemic to here and Vanuatu.*

Meleagridae

I WILD TURKEY (*Meleagris gallopavo*)

A few small flocks as we neared La Foa, they are quite well-established in the north.

Rallidae

BUFF-BANDED RAIL (*Gallirallus philippensis*)

Just a single in a creek at the mangrove boardwalk, sadly not to be found again.

PURPLE SWAMPHEN (*Porphyrio porphyrio*)

This race samoensis is part of the Black-backed Swamphen group, which many split from Purple Swamphen. We saw them at the mangrove boardwalk, the small city park and near Farino.

Rhynochetidae

E KAGU (*Rhynochetos jubatus*)

What a star! The gray ghost of the forest put on a great show, with wings spread and crest erect when Jean-Marc held out a mirror! Our first group was a pair with two younger birds associated, then we came across singles at several spots, many with clay-caked faces where they had been feeding by pecking in the forest leaf litter floor. It is surely one of the mega-birds of the planet, and how it has managed to survive in what is now a very hostile environment is a miracle!

Scolopacidae

BAR-TAILED GODWIT (*Limosa lapponica*)

Six on the mudflats by Magenta airport.

GRAY-TAILED TATTLER (*Heterosceles brevipes*)

A single on lagoon rocks on Ouvea, the grey appearance and longer eye-stripe separating it from Wandering, which is much scarcer this far south.

Stercorariidae

PARASITIC JAEGER (*Stercorarius parasiticus*)

Two dark phase birds off Ouvea near all the terns. A species we don't usually record.

Laridae

SILVER GULL (*Larus novaehollandiae*)

A few around Noumea.

Sternidae

GREAT CRESTED TERN (*Sterna bergii*)

A few around Noumea and off Ouvea.

BRIDLED TERN (*Sterna anaethetus*)

Lots off the headland on Ouvea, feeding just off the reef break.

SOOTY TERN (*Sterna fuscata*)

Just a couple off the headland on Ouvea, also feeding just off the reef break.

Columbidae

METALLIC (WHITE-THROATED) PIGEON (*Columba vitiensis*)

Great looks at 5 as we were leaving Noumea on the first day, then again up at Mont Koghis where some feeding low-down in an exotic bush were very tame. This was a catch-up for the folks who did the Fiji trip too, as we missed them there.

SPOTTED DOVE (*Streptopelia chinensis*)

A few around Noumea.

EMERALD DOVE (*Chalcophaps indica*)

Great looks on Ouvea, and odd birds on Lifou and at Blue River.

I ZEBRA DOVE (*Geopelia striata*)

A new arrival here, this is the SE Asian species and has spread out from the zoo area. We saw a pair there, then 4 birds up at La Foa in the north later. It is even shown on the New Cal Birds place mat now! It is sometimes lumped with Peaceful Dove, but the calls and plumage are quite distinct.

RED-BELLIED FRUIT-DOVE (*Ptilinopus greyii*)

Great looks on Ouvea and again at Lifou where a fruiting fig held quite a few birds. It's an endemic to small Pacific islands.

E CLOVEN-FEATHERED DOVE (*Drepanoptila holosericea*)

This is one terrific bird, a monotypic genus with a unique plumage and amazingly loud whistling wings in flight. We had a fine male in a fruiting tree in Blue River, found by Simon, then 3 or 4 males at Mont Koghis. Dig those fluffy white anklets!

E NEW CALEDONIAN IMPERIAL-PIGEON (*Ducula goliath*)

This huge and subtly colored species gave very good looks in Blue River.

Psittacidae

RAINBOW LORIKEET (*Trichoglossus haematodus*)

A few around Noumea.

E HORNED PARAKEET (*Eunymphicus cornutus cornutus*)

This is one super endemic, we saw it beautifully by the park entrance on day one, then again up at Mont Koghis before a final fly-by at Farino.

E HORNED (OUVEA) PARAKEET (*Eunymphicus cornutus uvaeensis*)

Split by most authorities including HBW and BirdLife, this is a rare endemic to Ouvea. Luckily for us one of the landowners has found it is a good income source, and now lets the parakeets come to feed on his pawpaws. We got terrific close views and photos. We were the first tour ever to see this species way back in 2002, after complex negotiations, and it's now a regular for us.

E NEW CALEDONIAN PARAKEET (*Cyanoramphus saissetti*)

Great views in Blue River, one next morning just outside the park, my first away from the NP proper, then two more just near the park entrance. It's a split from the NZ Red-crowned Parakeet, with much yellower underparts, more blue in the wing and a quite different call.

Cuculidae

FAN-TAILED CUCKOO (*Cacomantis flabelliformis pyrrophanus*)

This race is endemic to the Solomons and New Ca and has a very distinctive song and call, I expect it to be split when someone looks at the complex (which is probably 4 species). Once again they were vocal on Ouvea and we lured one in for quite good looks. It was also briefly heard at Farino.

SHINING BRONZE-CUCKOO (*Chrysococcyx lucidus*)

*Great views at Blue River and heard at Farino, Mont Koghis and on both Ouvea and Lifou. The taxon here is *layardi*, endemic to here and Vanuatu.*

Tytonidae

BARN OWL (*Tyto alba*)

*Fantastic views of one perched in daylight on the airport fence on Lifou, well spotted by Mike! This form is now split as Pacific Barn Owl *T. javanica* and is the one in Australia and PNG too. Clements will eventually catch up I imagine.*

Apodidae

GLOSSY SWIFTLET (*Collocalia esculenta*)

The taxon here has a huge white rump and is quite widespread.

WHITE-RUMPED SWIFTLET (*Aerodramus spodiopygius*)

These can be hard to separate from Glossy, but they are dingier above without the blue gloss on the mantle, duller below and with a smaller white rump. We saw a few on all 3 islands, and this is now a split from the Australian Swiftlet with which it was formerly merged.

Alcedinidae

SACRED KINGFISHER (*Todirhamphus sanctus*)

Common on Ouvea especially, and widespread elsewhere.

Hirundinidae

PACIFIC SWALLOW (*Hirundo tahitica*)

Just a few birds on Lifou and around Noumea.

Campephagidae

MELANESIAN CUCKOO-SHRIKE (*Coracina caledonica*)

Great looks in Blue River Park and a few on Lifou too.

E NEW CALEDONIAN CUCKOO-SHRIKE (*Coracina analis*)

As always, we only saw this species in Blue River Park. The dark eye and chestnut undertail coverts are distinctive in good light, as are the chestnut feathers on the bend of the wing and the distinctive sibilant call.

LONG-TAILED TRILLER (*Lalage leucopyga*)

Nice looks in a few sites, the first near Noumea by the White-throated Pigeons and then in Blue River Park.

Pycnonotidae

- I** RED-VENTED BULBUL (*Pycnonotus cafer*)
A few around Noumea.

Rhipiduridae

GRAY FANTAIL (*Rhipidura [fuliginosa] albiscapa*)

A few in Blue River Park and at Farino, this is the Gray Fantail and not the newly split New Zealand species.

STREAKED FANTAIL (*Rhipidura spilodera*)

The local race verreauxi is pretty distinct to the Fiji birds and may well be a different species. We had good looks in Blue River and on both Ouvea and Lifou

Monarchidae

SOUTHERN SHRIKEBILL (*Clytorhynchus pachycephaloides*)

This was a star in Blue River, with quite good looks first day and then a real performer next day that even sat for photos. Endemic to here and Vanuatu, and a very distinctive bird currently placed in monarchs.

MELANESIAN (NEW CALEDONIAN) FLYCATCHER (*Myiagra caledonica*)

Endemic to here and Vanuatu, they showed nicely in Blue River and again on the Loyalty Islands, where the birds lack the big eye-ring of the big island birds.

Petroicidae

- E** YELLOW-BELLIED ROBIN (*Eopsaltria flaviventris*)

Great looks in Blue River Park, where six birds were making a loose flock by the Grand Kaori, an unusually large number.

Pachycephalidae

GOLDEN WHISTLER (*Pachycephala pectoralis littayei*)

This race has a large bill and a greeny=brown tail; we saw it very nicely on Ouvea. There are currently 61 subspecies in the complex as per Clements, which is long overdue for splitting up.

- E** NEW CALEDONIAN WHISTLER (*Pachycephala caledonica*)

Great looks in Blue River and at Farino.

RUFOUS WHISTLER (*Pachycephala rufiventris*)

The local race is xanthebraea and is fairly distinct in male plumage with a thin breast band and different color underparts, though the vocals sound very similar to Australian birds. We saw them well at Blue River, Mont Koghis and Farino, in the drier woodlands.

Acanthizidae

FAN-TAILED GERYGONE (*Gerygone flavolateralis*)

Great views in Blue River and at the mangrove boardwalk, this is a near-endemic otherwise only in Vanuatu and Rennell Is. in the Solomons

Zosteropidae

- E** LARGE LIFOU WHITE-EYE (*Zosterops inornatus*)

Aargh! This thing is always hard and this year was no exception. We heard 5 or 6 birds in the dwarf dense woodland near the airport, but getting a view was really hard and we only managed glimpses for a few, despite one being close several times. It is most unlike other white-eyes with a thrush like song-phrase, and only calls back to the tape without really coming in. I do wonder about its true affinities.

- E** GREEN-BACKED WHITE-EYE (*Zosterops xanthochrous*)

Common on the main island, we had a flock of about 70 up at Farino which was unusually large.

- E** SMALL LIFOU WHITE-EYE (*Zosterops minutus*)

This small and nicely colored species was quite common on Lifou.

SILVER-EYE (*Zosterops lateralis*)

Common on Ouvea (nigrescens), a few on Lifou (melanops) and just a couple of sightings on the main island (griseonota). These forms are very dark faced, especially on the islands.

Meliphagidae

DARK-BROWN HONEYEATER (*Lichmera incana*)

Common on the main island, this is a near-endemic otherwise only in Vanuatu.

- E** NEW CALEDONIAN MYZOMELA (*Myzomela caledonica*)
Great looks in Blue River Park and also seen at Farino, it is much pinker below than Scarlet Honeyeater with which it was formerly lumped, and has a quite different song
- CARDINAL MYZOMELA (*Myzomela cardinalis lifuensis*)
Great views of this striking red and black bird on Ouvea and Lifou, another near-endemic that is otherwise only in Vanuatu, Samoa and the Solomons.
- E** NEW CALEDONIAN FRIARBIRD (*Philemon diemenensis*)
One of the most distinctive of the genus, we saw it at Blue River and had a very obliging bird up at Farino that sat for ages close by.
- E** CROW HONEYEATER (*Gymnomyza aubryana*)
This is one of the rarest birds on the island and also one of the most difficult. Jean-Mac did his Led Zeppelin impression by trying to lure it in on day one with his micro-amp (that looked like and weighed about as much as a car battery). We heard it twice but it did not show. It was my squeaking on day two that finally brought success. The bird gave the growling call and was watched picking at mossy trunks quite high in the forest stratum. The total population must be very small and declining, I suspect just a few hundred birds, and it's always great to find it, one of the birds of the trip!
- E** BARRED HONEYEATER (*Phylidonyris undulata*)
This distinctive endemic showed well at all the mainland sites, with a singing bird at the picnic spot in Blue River being very memorable.

Artamidae

- WHITE-BREASTED WOODSWALLOW (*Artamus leucorhynchus*)
A few around on the mainland, also on Ouvea and Lifou.

Corvidae

- E** NEW CALEDONIAN CROW (*Corvus moneduloides*)
Great looks at two small groups at Blue River, they are Jackdaw-sized with odd chisel-like beaks and a great yapping call. We also got a group of 3 then two others up at Farino.

Sturnidae

- E** STRIATED STARLING (*Aplonis striata*)
Nice looks at Blue River and on the Loyalty Islands, where they have a distinctive call note.

- I** COMMON MYNA (*Acridotheres tristis*)
Common on the main island.

Passeridae

- I** HOUSE SPARROW (*Passer domesticus*)
A few around Noumea.

Estrildidae

- COMMON WAXBILL (*Estrilda astrild*)
This is getting commoner each year, we had flocks of 40-50 at the mangrove boardwalk and small flocks at various other mainland sites.
- E** RED-THROATED PARROTFINCH (*Erythrura psittacea*)
This showy endemic gave fantastic looks at Blue River and then at both Mont Koghis and Farino.
- I** CHESTNUT-BREASTED MUNIA (MANNIKIN) (*Lonchura castaneothorax*)
This one seems to get scarcer each year, maybe being out-competed by the waxbills? We saw one at the city park and then 5 birds at the mangrove boardwalk.

MAMMALS

- ORNATE FLYING-FOX (*Pteropus ornatus*)
Flying-foxes flying over at high altitude in broad daylight on the mainland at Blue River and Mont Koghis are this species, which is one of 3 local species. We usually only see them in the islands so maybe numbers are recovering?

Additional Comments

Best birds were as ever the amazing Kagu, and also the Crow Honeyeater as it was such a devil to find. Cloven-feathered Dove showed really well, and all 3 endemic parakeets gave fine views. Phil would vote for the huge female Peregrine too, this was his eighth trip here and the first sighting!\$4\$4\$4\$4Ornate flying-foxes were much more evident than usual, maybe their numbers are recovering? They like to fly very high in the middle of the day too, which seems really odd. We saw them at both Blue River and Mont Koghis.

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