



The rare Black-faced Pitta posed so well on Santa Isabel, right at the edge of the pitta world range! All photos by Joshua Bergmark.

SOLOMON ISLANDS

8 AUGUST – 3 SEPTEMBER 2019

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Magnificent, but often skulking birds. Mud, sweat, extended slippery treks, steep mountains, shaky logistics, and constant battles with land access. This is what a Solomon Islands tour is all about, but these sleepy forgotten islands in the southwest Pacific hold some glorious, very rarely observed birds that very few birders will ever have the privilege to add to their lifelist. The Solomon Islands comprise Endemic Bird Areas 198 and 199, and although the total area of this archipelago is smaller than Belgium (less than 50,000 km²), these rich islands have more restricted range species than any other Endemic Bird Area in the world! Of the Solomons EBA endemics, we amazingly recorded all 70 of the likely species on this route, plus an additional clean sweep of the 13 available Melanesian endemics - hitting 100% of our key targets in this demanding country is certainly a miracle, and surely rates this as our most successful tour yet! Of these specials, just two were heard only, so we were all very pleased indeed. We had fantastic looks at four genera that are endemic to the Solomon Islands: *Rigidipenna* (Solomons Frogmouth), *Nesoclopeus* (Woodford's Rail), *Meliarchus* (Makira Honeyeater) and *Woodfordia* (Bare-eyed White-eye), plus enjoyed the easternmost members of two highly desirable families (the cute Solomons Cockatoo and the glorious Black-faced Pitta). This tour is definitely one of our toughest trips through a combination of intense physical effort, unpredictable weather and capricious logistics. The slippery wet paths of the Makira hills, the steep hike with an overnight high on Kolombangara volcano, and the tough trails of Santa Isabel will long be remembered by all participants. However, amongst all these hardships, the birds indeed performed brilliantly!



The smart looking and definitively flightless Roviana Rail entertained us on Kolombangara!

First on Rennell, the glorious Rennell Shrikebill and Rennell Whistler were favourites alongside the strange white-eyes and other endemics. The Western Isles with picturesque tropical lagoons and reefs gave us the splendid Gizo White-eye sitting in roadside shrubs; two confiding Roviana Rail in a field; multiple views of the very rare Solomons Nightjar; some imposing Sanford's Sea Eagle; and of course for the fittest participants we saw the enigmatic Kolombangara Leaf Warbler high on the wet and misty mountainous slopes. Over to Malaita, we saw the drab Malaita White-eye easily, and we continued our recent run with the rare Red-vested Myzomela, sighting at least three birds. The undescribed taxon of Woodford's Rail was also a highlight, with four birds strutting about on the road in front of us! On much-anticipated Santa Isabel the glorious endemic Black-faced Pitta was a star performer, with one individual seemingly trained to land every time on the bamboo pole placed for it by the leader! The enigmatic Solomons Frogmouth, Solomons Boobook, and dainty Red-capped Myzomela were also favourites before we finally crossed to Makira, where a rich suite of endemics and specialties included Yellow-legged Pigeon in the mist; Makira Fantail and White-collared Monarch feeding flocks; an abundance of White-headed Fruit-Doves and Chestnut-bellied Imperial Pigeon; the skulking Makira Thrush and Shade Bush Warbler; plus of course Makira Dwarf Kingfisher and Makira Honeyeater sitting still for once! In all, we recorded 159 species of bird, including 7 heard and 2 leader only, but of course it is the quality of the birds we did all see that matters! Read on for more...



The bizarre Solomons Frogmouth was once lumped with Marbled Frogmouth, but is now rightfully in its own genus!

We arrived in the happy isles for the start of another action-packed adventure through central Melanesia. A brief afternoon outing at Betikama Wetlands behind Honiara provided our first taste of the local avifauna, with lovely Solomons Cockatoo flying overhead in the evening light and a number of amazing perched views of smart Yellow-bibbed Lory. A bold Melanesian Kingfisher sat atop his dead stick very politely, but flybys of Cardinal Lory, Song Parrot and Eclectus Parrot were all to be improved upon in the coming days. Try as we might some vocal Woodford's Rails would not quite show themselves, nor would the White-browed Crakes! Only a few waterfowl were present, with Pacific Black Duck, Australasian Swamphen, Little Pied Cormorant, Striated Heron and Intermediate Egret noted, while White-bellied Cuckooshrikes and Olive-backed Sunbirds perched prominently overhead.



The Guadalcanal forms of Oriole Whistler (left) and Cockerell's Fantail (right) showed beautifully!

Much to our delight, at the last minute one of my contacts finally got us permission to visit the Gold Ridge mine behind Honiara. Being a little higher than Mount Austen and in better forest, we were hoping for some high quality birding. Indeed, after an early start we found ourselves in a small but well-preserved forest patch where we quickly found almost every endemic target for Guadalcanal! Chestnut-bellied Monarchs and Solomons Monarchs were so responsive that they flew straight past within touching distance multiple times, while both the endemic subspecies of Cockerell's Fantail and Rufous Fantail performed very nicely at eye-level. The attractive Guadalcanal form of Oriole Whistler was common, and multiple pairs of Steel-blue Flycatcher displayed in excitement all around us. A flock of strange White-billed Crows were tempted up from the valley below, and maybe best of all a minimum of five scarce Black-headed Myzomelas were seen right next to the track, never mind the usual neck-craning! Finsch's Pygmy Parrot fed on some low boughs, while the noisy Solomons Cuckooshrike, more subdued Grey-capped Cicadabirds, and of course Brown-winged Starlings proved plentiful. Some MacKinlay's Cuckoo-Dove and Superb Fruit-Dove showed briefly, while our first tiny Midget Flowerpecker contrasted with huge Blyth's Hornbills. Later on an Oriental Hobby cruised overhead, but it was not over as on the walk down in the hot sun a pair of Ultramarine Kingfishers sat on top of a tree in the open for many minutes - somewhat unusual for this typically flighty species!



The smart Ultramarine Kingfisher (left) and the uncommon Black-headed Myzomela (right) were confiding on Guadalcanal!

After a lengthy lunchtime shopping spree (*future participants: please, read the tour information extra carefully for this complicated tour!!!*), we visited Mount Austen for an evening session. The "Guadalcanal" Solomons Boobook were not in their hole, and a frustrating pair after dark flew off as soon as the torch turned on. Nevertheless, it was satisfactory to have excellent views of the flightless "Guadalcanal" Woodford's Rail, although only half of us were quick enough to raise binoculars in time! Otherwise a few Claret-breasted Fruit-Dove perched up nicely, and a pair of Buff-necked Coucal were spotted allopreening at the top of a tree in the setting sun.

Next morning our short flight to Rennell was not just on time, but an hour early! This relaxed Polynesian-style paradise island is still being rapidly degraded by Chinese logging and mining activities -passing over the forest as we came in to land I could not spot any untouched primary vegetation! So very sad... After quickly dropping our gear at the guesthouse, we of course headed straight out before the day warmed up too much. An excellent morning got us acquainted with most of the specialties which are still common in degraded habitat - both Rennell White-eye and the intriguing Bare-eyed White-eye were plentiful, but the superb Rennell Shrikebill was certainly a crowd favourite with his lovely rusty orange plumage and enormous beak! A "Rennell" Island Thrush was only seen by some crossing the track, but both the "Rennell" Song Parrot and the interesting "Rennell" Australian White Ibis were noted a few times. Silver-capped Fruit-Dove is not a true endemic, being found on a scattering of nearby small islets, but this is certainly the place to see it! We had

dozens of individuals feeding in one fruiting fig, scoping their pretty colour patterns for as long as we wanted. During the afternoon a few Rennell Fantails appeared, plus the endemic forms of Brown Goshawk, and Shining Bronze Cuckoo. A number of Melanesian species also found in Vanuatu and New Calidonia make it to Rennell, and we made sure to enjoy flashy Cardinal Myzomela, an abundance of Fan-tailed Gerygone and Pacific Imperial Pigeon, a few Pacific Kingfisher, not to mention two eventually obliging Melanesian Flycatchers! Otherwise, Barred Cuckooshrike and Finsch's Pygmy Parrot were positively common as usual, while on the mammal front we scrutinised both Pacific Flying-fox and the endemic Rennell Flying-fox.



White-billed Crows are strange corvids indeed! A split of the two subspecies has been proposed, so luckily we saw both!



Always one of the tour highlights, this Rennell Shrikebill sang beautifully to us at the start of the trip!

The pressure was still on for our full day on Rennell, as the hardest species was yet to even be heard. Soon after dawn we finally got a response, and following a fairly challenging stumble into the undergrowth we were disappointed as only the briefest flashes of movement caught our eyes. We were close to giving up, but at this point the lovely golden-brown Rennell Whistler suddenly decided to switch temperaments and flew straight down to us before slowly and calmly circling around in full view! Magical! Nearby, some more “Rennell” Island Thrush showed very well, with one even having a bath on the track! We slowly returned to town, seeing many of the same species as yesterday, but also adding our final endemic, the bulky Rennell Starling. The rest of the day was brightened by splendid encounters with the resident Rennell form of Shining Bronze Cuckoo and another Melanesian Flycatcher, but as we had nothing left to see the afternoon proved fairly relaxing!



Two endemic passerines of Rennell – the weird Bare-eyed White-eye (top), and the beautiful Rennell White-eye (bottom)!

After an early flight back to Honiara for a rapid shower and repack (plus some Pacific Golden Plover on the airstrip), we were soon off again to the picturesque Western Isles. Our first boat journey through the lagoons and bays in the evening light was very pleasant, and we arrived at the ecolodge on Tetepare Island right on dusk. This was Birdquest's first visit to the uninhabited island, where wildlife has been protected for hundreds of years due to local superstitions and taboos. We slept well after being treated to some exceptional cooking and lovely new rooms. At first light however we were back to business, and the first bird we saw was the newly-split Dark-eyed White-eye, sporting their funny yellow pectoral tufts! Indeed, a Birdquest lifer before breakfast! The clearing around our rooms overlooking the Pacific Ocean was very birdy, and some Western Isles specialties such as the marvellous White-capped Monarch and the Crimson-rumped Myzomela made their first appearances. Song Parrots eyeballed us from some low shrubs, and Beach Kingfishers made themselves known by calling from prominent perches. A surprisingly confiding Melanesian Megapode walked across the grass, our first impressive Island Imperial Pigeons showed well, some Cardinal Lory flew by in the morning sun, and a Claret-breasted Fruit-Dove dropped only metres above our heads!



Another fantastic white-eye, this Dark-eyed White-eye was common on Tetepare!

After breakfast we threaded our way along the coast to a small raised island in a coastal lagoon - it was here that a pair of Solomons Nightjars were known to live. An intriguing species, they exclusively nest just above the high tide line on undisturbed tropical beaches! The species is likely critically endangered, Tetepare being the only place with any recent records. We were of course very happy when one bird was flushed by our local ranger and flew straight past us into the mangroves, showing off his dark chestnut and golden brown colouration which is quite distinct from the closely related White-throated Nightjar of Australia. On the way back we saw a superb Little Kingfisher, and a pair of dapper Moustached Treeswift. During the afternoon we motored over to a different area where another pair were flushed, but we were not lucky enough to spot them perched. A nearby roost contained three Roseate Tern, some Black-naped Tern, Greater Crested Tern, and a pair of Beach Stone-curlew eyed us warily. Many Eastern Reef Egret and a few Striated Heron were evident, and Frank heard a flushing tattler make the diagnostic trill of a Wandering Tattler as it disappeared around the corner! A short walk on the trail behind our huts in the evening produced the interesting local form of "New Georgia" Cockerell's Fantail, but not much else. The leader later saw some Umboi Tube-nosed Bats feeding above the shower block after everybody else had gone to bed.



Two more cracking birds from Tetepare – the beautiful White-capped Monarch (top), and the endemic subspecies of Cockerell's Fantail!

Most of us gave the nightjar one last shot the next morning, and after carefully wading across an inlet which was slightly too deep I was ecstatic to finally lock the scope on a roosting individual near where we had flushed it the day before. Everyone else came over and we had superb looks at this highly endangered

beach-nesting shorebird (I can call it that, right?), as the warm tropical water lapped at our thighs! Jumping on the boats, we bid Tetepare farewell and motored for a few hours towards Kolombangara. Along the way, we checked a few feeding flocks hoping for shearwaters, but the only new bird was a Brown Booby, with a few Common Tern and Bridled Tern thrown in the mix. We made good time and reached our cosy guesthouse on the western shore of the imposing stratovolcano in the mid-afternoon. Walking around the town and school we had perched views of the sublime Duchess Lorikeet feeding in flowering coconuts, and a party of Solomons White-eyes feeding with the New Georgia subspecies of Steel-blue Flycatcher. The highlight however was a pair of Roviana Rail which fed almost unconcernedly in a field as we watched on. New to science in 1991, this flightless curiosity is very localised, and not usually this easy to see!



Searching for Solomons Nightjar (top), and Solomons Nightjar (bottom)!

The infamous slog up the western flank of Kolombangara was unexpectedly even more difficult this year. It became apparent about two hours in that a devastating amount of logging had occurred since our last visit, and the already challenging local trails had turned into diabolically muddy, slippery and unnavigable logging tracks. We were lucky that a passing vehicle could be flagged down, which made up our lost time. Sadly the area we used to easily see New Georgia Dwarf Kingfisher was no more, although one bird was still present and gave a brief glimpse to some. Once we reached the 500m ridge some excellent looks at Kolombangara Monarch were obtained, along with a brief Yellow-bibbed Fruit-Dove amidst multitudes of Solomons White-eyes. Arriving at Camp Professor in the late afternoon we staked out the clearing overlook, but only Pirjo saw one brief flock of Pale Mountain Pigeons went by. Frustratingly, at about 4am it started raining, and it did not stop. I'm sure that most of us would prefer to forget the very wet and cold events of that morning, but long story short some people managed to see both Kolombangara Leaf Warbler and Kolombangara White-eye up near the crater rim, however most did not. A few other species were heard during the hike down, but no self-respecting birds were appearing in this weather. One Heinroth's Shearwater was seen passing the boat not long before we arrived at Gizo late in the afternoon, but as is often the case with tropical seabirds the views were brief, and some people did not see the bird before it disappeared over a wave. Hot showers, good food, and a proper rest went a long way that night!



The elusive Kolombangara Monarch wasn't too hard to find this year, if you discount the walk required to get up there!

Our island-hopping day saw us speeding towards Ranongga at dawn. It was quite choppy owing to yesterday's weather system, but nonetheless we managed to chase a few noddy feeding flocks. They are easy to spot from a distance when dozens of Lesser Frigatebirds are in attendance! Sadly none held any more Heinroth's, but we were soon cheered up by a number of dapper Ranongga White-eyes and some smiling local hospitality! Moving on to the next island before lunch, it took us significantly longer to secure views of the endemic Vella Lavella White-eye - maybe something to do with the large number of young boys carrying slingshots! A Cockerell's Fantail distracted us somewhat (these ones on Ranongga and Vella Lavella are quite distinct from the others in New Georgia), but eventually everyone was pleased with their white-eyes, having seen the bright orange bill and grey underparts which characterise this species. A slow return to Gizo via a few more shearwater-less feeding flocks was uneventful, and although most of us returned to the water in the evening we only found a Wilson's Storm Petrel.



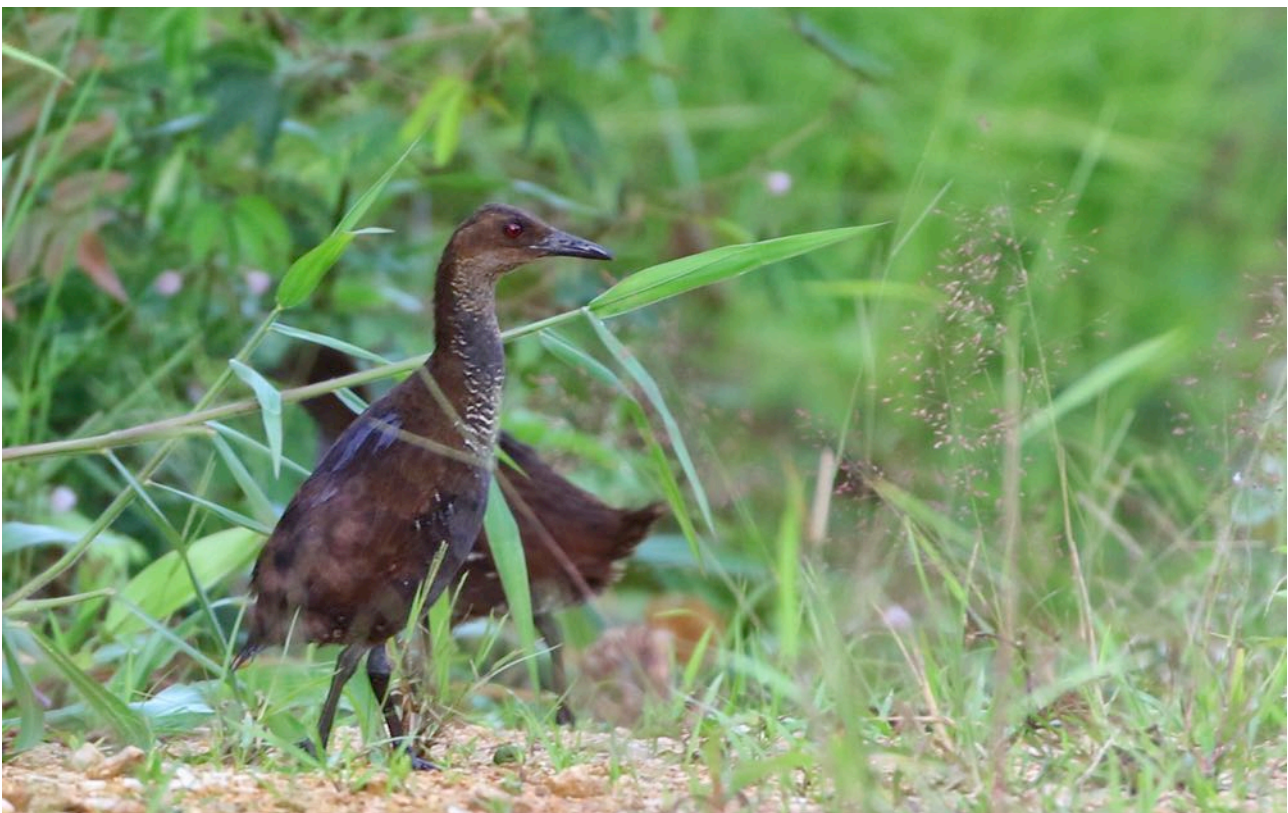
The dapper Rangongga White-eye was one of our favourites in the Western Isles!

The next day after a minor delay and the world's slowest taxi ride we made it to some small patches of scrub outside the main town on Gizo. Here, we had several splendid looks at the beautiful Gizo White-eye, certainly one of the most endangered birds in the Solomons, and indeed a real looker! In the same area a Melanesian Kingfisher showed well, as did a pair of Pacific Baza. After a welcome midday siesta we transferred to the airport, where a last-minute Sanford's Sea Eagle gave a nice and close flyby. Strong winds sadly ruined our evening plans for spotlighting back in Honiara.



Chatting with the locals at dusk on Malaita!

The logistical problems just kept coming, with a delayed flight landing us a few hours late in Malaita, where we were promptly kicked out of our hotel by government officials who had booked it for a conference! Our moods improved later in the day when two dark shapes darted across in front of the vehicle as we circled some backroads, and some taping brought out no less than four Woodford's Rail! This undescribed taxon is endemic to Malaita (the species may ultimately be split four ways), and to our delight the birds allowed extended study as they strutted around in front of us! We spent the first part of the next morning at a friendly village where the somewhat drab Malaita White-eye showed nicely, but a female Red-vested Myzomela was only seen by some. We then spent time seeking permission to explore other areas of forest, but had no luck on this front today. During a vehicular separation, half of the group had a look at the white-eyed endemic form of Brown-winged Starling, and the other half saw the tricoloured endemic form of Solomons Cuckooshrike. The afternoon was very wet, but an excellent raptor hour gave us marvellous eye-level encounters with our first Pied Goshawk, Variable Goshawk, and another Sanford's Sea Eagle. A male Red-vested Myzomela flew in during a brief dry spell, and although he moved on quickly some lucky souls had excellent views! A tip-off from some locals saw us attempt to find "Malaita" Solomons Boobook after dark, but it was a little difficult to listen properly over the sounds of excited children!



The rare and still undescribed form of Woodford's Rail on Malaita could not have performed better!

Next day we were back at our favourite village, with the chief leading us up the hill and into some remaining ridge forest. It probably would have been excellent, had the rain not been pouring down! Nevertheless, a responsive Malaita Dwarf Kingfisher flew several circles around us on the way up. Although it never perched, we were happy to see this rarely encountered species, which was in fact our third Birdquest lifer for the tour! Frustratingly, the rain never abated despite us waiting in a small clearing for a few hours. Eventually it was time to trudge down for lunch and a shower. It dried up before we headed back out in the evening, our session this time netting us the distinct "Malaita" Solomons Monarch, and another Brown-winged Starling. We tried owling again the next morning, this time hearing a duetting pair of "Malaita" Solomons Boobook just before dawn. While it was of course frustrating to not see them, as far as I am aware our record of this taxon is actually the first made by any foreigners for decades! A brief female Red-vested Myzomela was located again but it disappeared almost immediately (drizzling rain did not help!). Following a now familiar SolAir delay, we arrived in Honiara where the group relaxed and the leader frantically went shopping for the next ten days of food!

We began predawn back up at Mount Austen, but we only managed to see silhouettes as a boobook passed briefly overhead. Our arranged 4WD frustratingly did not come as advertised, so we couldn't explore further down the logging tracks. We were happy to improve our views of the Guadalcanal subspecies of Woodford's Rail, but a Guadalcanal Dwarf Kingfisher stubbornly refused to be seen by anyone but the leader. The flight to Santa Isabel was moved forward, then cancelled, then suddenly we were called to say it was departing in thirty minutes! After rushing to the airport we soon found ourselves landing on Fera Island before taking a boat over to the base of the Santa Isabel hills. A two hour walk up to Tirotozna Village tired everyone out, so we spent the afternoon chatting and enjoying the lovely local food at our cosy guesthouse looking out over the sea far below. All in all, it had been a slow few days of birding, but our luck was about to change! After dinner we ventured into the forest with Samson the Solomons Frogmouth Man. He tried hard with one bird which was regularly calling with the typical piercing whistle, but it wouldn't quite come. Moving to the other side of the village, a strong response from another individual was promising. Suddenly it was calling very close, but we could not find it in the trees... Too many frantic seconds passed before I spotted the bird sitting where else but below us, on some stalks of wild ginger! We had stupendous walkaway views of this bizarre species, complete with such a monstrous bill! Pirjo and Frank were especially happy (both wanting the complete set of frogmouths), and not long after we returned to our guesthouse the rain began to pour down. Impeccable timing!



One of the stars of the Solomons, the chunky Solomons Frogmouth is a real crowd-pleaser!!

Our good fortune continued into the next day. Starting early we were soon listening to the calls of a Black-faced Pitta emanate from a limestone gully. Knowing the usual difficulty of this species, which is often regarded as the world's hardest pitta, we were surprised when after a few minutes one was seen flying up the gully towards us! Of course it landed out of view, but over the course of the next ten minutes it offered good perched views to most of the group through various windows in the forest. A great way to start the day, although as usual we were glad of the four full days booked here to try and secure views for everybody! Some smart Yellow-throated White-eyes were easily tracked down, this endemic being one of the most common birds around the village. Hoping to reduce spotlighting efforts, we were taken to a Fearful Owl roost. The bird was not present, and another nearby area also turned up nothing. Later on we tried usual the "West Solomons" Solomons Boobook hollow, where three birds flushed out on our approach. We would have to keep trying! In the evening two more pittas came close, although neither gave any sort of visuals, as is typical!



Yes, rubber boots are essential for walking the trails on Santa Isabel...

Bright and early the following morning most of us were back in the forest, cutting our way through thickets and clambering over limestone to get closer to some pittas. With some tactical positioning, it didn't take too long before a flutter of wings altered us to a Black-faced Pitta alighting delicately on the exact bamboo pole I had placed for it. Stunning stuff, and a real treat to see this secretive bird so well and unobscured! Further along the trails a pair of pretty North Solomons Dwarf Kingfishers showed well, and a dark morph Pied Goshawk was seen perched. Back at base Frank spotted a Red-capped Myzomela in a flowering tree, but despite extended vigils over the rest of the day we couldn't find it again. Our visit to a small clearing in the forest marked our third attempt for the distinct "Santa Isabel" Woodford's Rail (these birds having pale yellow bills, unlike the two subspecies we had already seen on Guadalcanal and Malaita). Some brief views were had as one bolted across in front of us, but despite much trying we never did improve on this view over the following days. We also revisited the "West Solomons" Solomons Boobook tree, and some of us got great looks at one in the scope through a tiny hole in the leaves. Sadly the birds again flushed out before everyone had seen it... Fortunately, some spotlighting after dark revealed a very polite boobook which sat in the open until we had walked away! Fantastic! A Fearful Owl was heard twice, but although we had managed to get much closer the second time after scrambling down a steep trail, the bird did not respond any further.

An moderately strong earthquake in the night was exciting, but heavy rain for most of the following day curtailed any real birding. It eventually slowed enough for me to take Richard out for another attempt at "bamboo pitta", in which we were very successful, even getting photos of the bird which was just as wet as we were! The rest of the group avoided a drenching by staying around the guesthouse. Some had brief views of the Red-capped Myzomela near to where it had been seen yesterday during a dry period, but the rain soon began again. Brown-winged Starling and Metallic Starling were just about the only birds we saw for the rest of the day, with the rain seemingly getting heavier and heavier!



This young "West Solomons" Solomons Boobook posed ever so well for us on Santa Isabel!



Red-capped Myzomela took some work, but this lovely male obliged in the end!

In the morning some of us went back for the pitta, as Frank thought his injured back was finally well enough to hit the trails again. Astoundingly, we succeeded yet again with the very same polite bird, sitting on the very same bamboo pole. Finally, we had nailed down perfect views of this jewel for the entire group (even if it did take four sessions!). Steve then continued on with the leader to refind some North Solomons Dwarf Kingfishers, however the rain soon restarted! After an extended search we managed a great perched view of the kingfisher, and right nearby (much to our surprise) a lovely male Red-capped Myzomela dropped by and showed very well indeed! We sent our local guide back to get the others, and when they arrived we relocated it, enjoying his subtly beautiful plumage for as long as we wanted! We tried for some repeat sightings of a few species in the evening but didn't have much luck. At dusk we were positioned for one last crack at Fearful Owl, but sadly not even a single hoot was heard, although a roosting Solomons Monarch on the return walk was a nice bonus.



Our guesthouse and local helpers on Santa Isabel!

It was time to bid Tirotozna farewell, and after the obligatory photos at the viewpoint we descended to the coast and crossed the narrow channel again to the airstrip on Fera. We had some time before the flight to call up a nice pair of Island Monarchs, and the now regular Pacific Long-tailed Cuckoo came in briefly to check us out. After a quick transfer and bag switch in Honiara we were off again to Makira, our final island destination.

After a very rainy night, the clouds cleared for our hike up the Ravo River. We got a little wet, but the canoes kept us mostly dry during the dozen or so river crossings which had to be made. Our route was extremely birdy, and we were quickly admiring the endemic White-headed Fruit-Dove perched up in the morning light, while pleasantly common Sooty Myzomela darted between banana trees. We were surprised to see and hear many Chestnut-bellied Imperial Pigeons, as they are usually a fairly scarce bird which we only see higher up! Fruit for this somewhat nomadic species was clearly abundant at the moment, and just one tree held at least twenty individuals! Further along some fantastic feeding flocks produced the endemic White-collared Monarch, and the skulking Makira Fantail popped up nicely for everyone. Grey-throated White-eye and the lovely pale subspecies of Rufous Fantail were plentiful, while the world's easternmost Common Kingfishers lined the river banks, and a few Eastern Reef Egrets were seen too. On arrival at Na'ara we

sorted ourselves out before a short afternoon session was highlighted by a magnificent Crested Cuckoo-Dove doing display flights overhead and subsequently perching on a nearby branch. What a crazy bird! Mottled Flowerpeckers were tempted down to a small shrub in front of us, but Makira Honeyeaters gave only fleeting views, as is typical! To wrap up a pair of Makira Cicadabirds came in to check us out, and although the incipient rain drowned out spotlighting, we went to bed very pleased with our excellent haul of targets!



The uncommon Makira Fantail was just seen once, but he sat nicely for us!

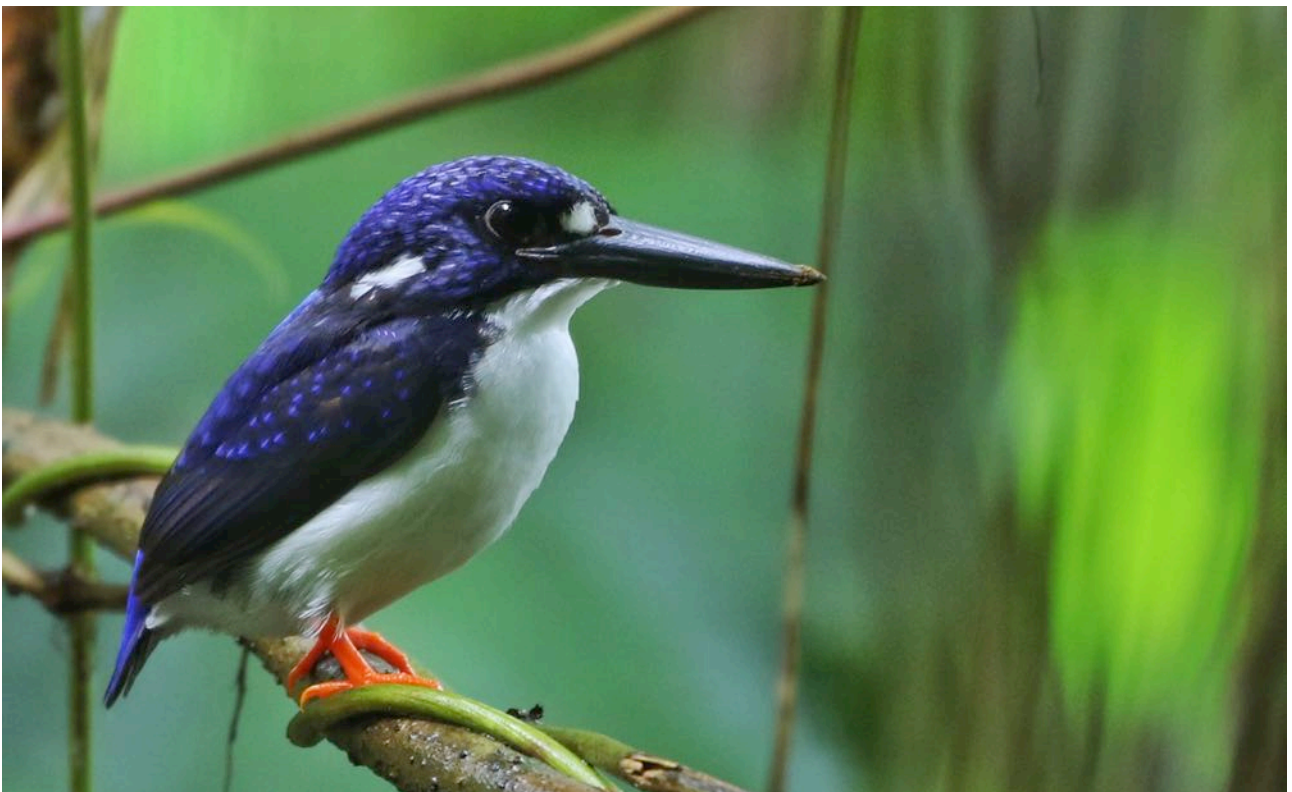


The weird-looking endemic Mottled Flowerpecker came right down low on Makira!



Striking White-collared Monarchs were fairly common this year on Makira!

Our assault on the higher ridge began the next morning as we hiked higher and higher towards Bagohane in the Hauta Conservation Area. We battled with some unresponsive birds, ultimately having great looks at a beautiful Makira Dwarf Kingfisher, the interesting Makira Starling, and much improved encounters with Makira Honeyeater. “Makira” Spangled Drongo on the other hand gave only glimpses, and a Yellow-legged Pigeon was heard but not seen (for now)... After a lovely lunch at the Birdquest hut, we went up the steep ridge trail and spent the afternoon dodging rain, having some great success in the end with a lovely chocolate-coloured Shade Bush Warbler coming within metres of us as we sat quietly in the forest! Makira Thrush were common as always, but they never really sat still long enough for binoculars (although Steve did get lucky with his views!). We stayed until after dark, but a combination of thick fog and skittish behaviour meant that the distinctive “Makira” Solomons Boobook was destined to be a leader only this time.



The stunning Makira Dwarf Kingfisher looks a lot like a Little Kingfisher, but with bright red legs!

We were woken by rain on the roof, but it cleared as we began our walk. Working first on improving our Makira Thrush views, everyone managed some significantly better sightings. At the top of the climb we brought out some Makira Leaf Warblers, and then the call of a Yellow-legged Pigeon sounded out nearby. We snuck closer to where our sharp-eyed local guide managed to spot it sitting unobscured in the tree. It was a little foggy, but we had some superb and extended views of this mega pigeon sporting an iridescent green breast and bright yellow legs. Although widespread in Melanesia, Makira is really the only place you can see it! The rain then began, and despite another four hours on the ridge getting wet, no other birds were found in the challenging conditions save for a brief leader only Pacific Robin. Returning to Na'ara we met up with Frank and Richard who had stayed at the bottom, where they had been successful in having good views of Makira Honeyeater, Makira Cicadabird and Makira Starling, amongst others. After picking up Buff-banded Rail and Oriental Dollarbird from the rooms, we all headed over to a fruiting tree where some Yellow-bibbed Fruit-Doves mixed with many White-headed Fruit-Doves, and another pair of Spangled Drongo showed briefly to some. I found Frank and Richard a Makira Dwarf Kingfisher, and then the rain set in again for the rest of the evening and night! The villagers reminded us that the other name for Makira is "Sky Island", owing to the constant low clouds!



The rare Melanesian endemic Yellow-legged Pigeon was scoped up well this year on Makira, the best place to see it!

Perpetuating the local jokes it continued raining well into the morning, but although this did ruin all of our relaxed birding plans it thankfully stopped just as we were about to begin our hike down to the coast. The cool damp air was quite pleasant as we made our way back through thirteen canoe crossings before arriving in Kirakira for cold beer, hot showers, and a soft bed! Due to an altered flight schedule, we were able to add in a bonus birding run to Ugi Island the next morning. Situated a few kilometres off the coast of Makira, we enjoyed fabulous views of the all black and vocally distinct "Ugi" Chestnut-bellied Monarch, plus the strange dark throated Rufous Fantail. Sadly we were not able to penetrate further into good forest in the time we had for the other monarch, but it was nonetheless a morning well spent! We arrived back in Honiara later that afternoon, and had a lovely final dinner reminiscing moments from our challenging trip!



Two bonus birds – the dark-faced “Ugi” Rufous Fantail, and what I think is the first ever photo of Guadalcanal Dwarf Kingfisher!

We still had some birding left to do though. Finally, after four failed attempts during our other stopovers in Honiara, a real 4WD appeared! At dawn we were positioned in the hills of Guadalcanal where beautiful rays of sunlight beamed through gaps in the forest. We didn't hold too much hope for the morning, given the scarcity of the birds we still needed, but amazingly it didn't take long to spot a flock of rare White-eyed Starlings attending a fruiting tree down in the valley below us! We had wonderful views of this beautiful starling, which has still only been seen by a handful of people (and now, two tours in a row by us at the same spot!). Never sated, most of the group took one last slide down a steep slope with me to bash along some small forest streams. After a few scratches and a bit more mud, a beautiful Guadalcanal Dwarf Kingfisher flushed up from a low perch and sat in full view for as long as we wanted! An absolutely amazing end to the tour, and even though my DSLR was at the hotel, we used Steve's compact camera to get what I think are the first ever photos of this pretty species. What an end to a fantastic tour with my easy-going and keen bunch of Birdquesters. If you can push through in the Solomons, you can be confident that travelling anywhere else in the world will be a breeze!



The group at Mt Austen with some ominous clouds... Still smiling, before the mud and rain! Thanks for a fantastic tour guys!



One of the most beautiful 'first light' moments I have ever seen greeted us on the last morning of the tour, as did White-eyed Starling!

BIRD OF THE TOUR (AS VOTED FOR BY THE GROUP)

1. Black-faced Pitta
2. Solomons Frogmouth
3. Rennell Shrikebill
4. Solomons Nightjar
5. "Malaita" Woodford's Rail

SYSTEMATIC LIST OF BIRD SPECIES RECORDED DURING THE TOUR

Total number of bird species recorded: 159

The species names and taxonomy used in the report mostly follows Gill, F & D Donsker (Eds). IOC World Bird Names. This list is updated several times annually and is available at <http://www.worldbirdnames.org>. Species which were heard but not seen are indicated by the symbol (H).

Species which were only recorded by the leader are indicated by the symbol (LO).

Species which were not personally recorded by the leader are indicated by the symbol (NL).

Species marked with the diamond symbol (◊) are either endemic to the country or local region or considered 'special' birds for some other reason (e.g. it is only seen on one or two Birdquest tours; it is difficult to see across all or most of its range; the local form is endemic or restricted-range and may in future be treated as a full species).

Pacific Black Duck *Anas superciliosa* Noted regularly throughout on a few different islands.

Melanesian Megapode ◊ (M Scrubfowl) *Megapodius eremita* Great looks on Tetepare, noted elsewhere.

Wilson's Storm Petrel *Oceanites oceanicus* One passing by between Kolombangara and Gizo.

Wedge-tailed Shearwater *Ardenna pacifica* Two while searching for Heinroth's offshore from Ranongga.

Heinroth's Shearwater ◊ *Puffinus heinrothi* One seen passing in front of the boat offshore from Gizo one evening.

Australian White Ibis *Threskiornis molucca* Several of the small and pink-legged Rennell subspecies seen.

Black Bittern *Dupetor flavicollis* A few calling on the logging roads behind Mount Austen. (H)

Nankeen Night Heron (Rufous N H) *Nycticorax caledonicus* One briefly on Ugi while searching for other birds.

Striated Heron *Butorides striata* A few noted throughout.

Intermediate Egret *Ardea intermedia* Some at Betikama Wetlands.

Pacific Reef Heron (P R Egret) *Egretta sacra* Most common along the coast of Tetepare, also noted elsewhere.

Great Frigatebird *Fregata minor* One identified above Tetepare.

Lesser Frigatebird *Fregata ariel* Hundreds of individuals throughout the Western Isles.

Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster* Some during our boat travels through the Western Isles.

Little Pied Cormorant *Microcarbo melanoleucos* Just two at Betikama Wetlands on our first afternoon.

Eastern Osprey *Pandion cristatus* Common in the Western Isles.

Pacific Baza *Aviceda subcristata* Both in the Western Isles, and on Malaita.

Variable Goshawk *Accipiter hiogaster* A few singles throughout.

Brown Goshawk *Accipiter fasciatus* Only on Rennell, where relatively common.

Pied Goshawk ◊ *Accipiter albogularis* Our first good sighting was on Malaita, then a dark morph on Santa Isabel.

Brahminy Kite *Haliastur indus* Seen most days.



The thirteen canoe-assisted river crossings on Makira are great fun!

Sanford's Sea Eagle ◊ *Haliaeetus sanfordi* Magnificent encounters in the Western Isles, and on Malaita.

Woodford's Rail ◊ *Nesoclopeus woodfordi* All three endemic subspecies seen – Guadalcanal, Malaita, Santa Isabel.

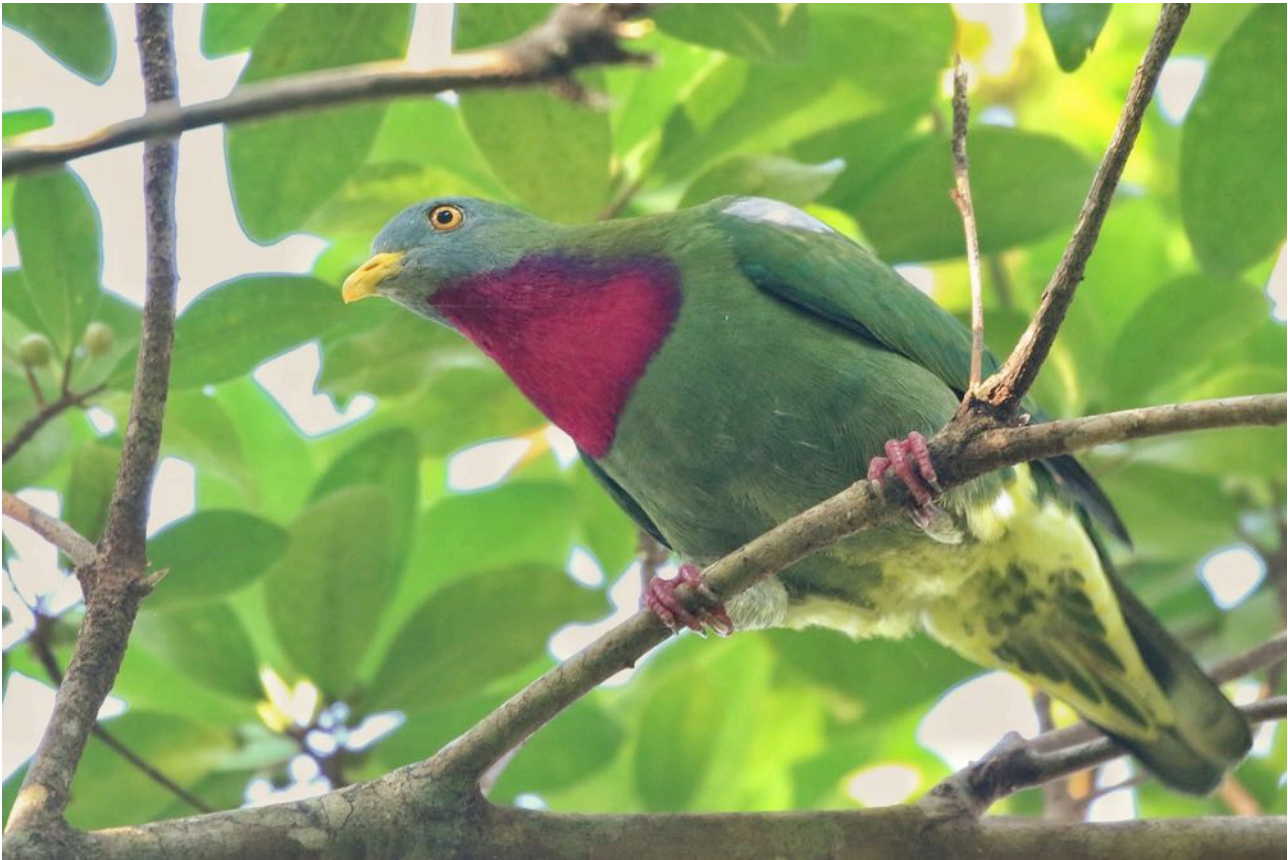
Buff-banded Rail *Gallirallus philippensis* A family of birds lied by the rooms on Makita.

Roviana Rail ◊ *Gallirallus rovianae* One pair seen superbly on the lower slopes of Kolombangara.

Pale-vented Bush-hen (Rufous-tailed B-h) *Amaurornis moluccana* Heard only a few times in thick grass. (H)

White-browed Crake *Porzana cinerea* Heard, and seen by some crossing a grassy opening on Makira. (H / NL)

Australasian Swamphen *Porphyrio melanotus* Seen at Betikama Wetlands, and on Tetepare.
Beach Stone-curlew (B Thick-knee) *Esacus magnirostris* Nice looks at a pair on Ranongga.
Pacific Golden Plover *Pluvialis fulva* Some small flocks on various airstrips throughout.
Whimbrel (Eurasian W) *Numenius phaeopus* Three distant birds on Vella Lavella.
Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres* A few along the coast of Tetepare.
Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos* Noted a few times.
Wandering Tattler *Tringa incana* One for Frank off Tetepare was heard giving the diagnostic call. (NL)
Brown Noddy *Anous stolidus* Small numbers mixed in with Black Noddy flocks in the Western Isles.
Black Noddy *Anous minutus* Abundant in the Western Isles in particular.
Greater Crested Tern (Swift T) *Thalasseus bergii* Regularly noted in the Western Isles.
Bridled Tern *Onychoprion anaethetus* Some nice looks in the Western Isles.
Roseate Tern *Sterna dougallii* Three at a roost off Tetepare.
Black-naped Tern *Sterna sumatrana* Regularly encountered in the Western Isles.
Common Tern *Sterna hirundo* Just a few near Munda.



Claret-breasted Fruit-Dove is a commonly encountered denizen of the forest in the Solomons!

Metallic Pigeon *Columba vitiensis* Heard only in the mist high up on Makira. (H)
Yellow-legged Pigeon ◊ *Columba pallidiceps* Brilliant views of two individuals high up on Makira!
MacKinlay's Cuckoo-Dove ◊ *Macropygia mackinlayi* We saw this tiny cuckoo-dove a few times throughout.
Crested Cuckoo-Dove ◊ *Reinwardtoena crassirostris* Fantastic looks at one bird displaying on Makira.
Stephan's Emerald Dove *Chalcophaps stephani* Most common on Makira, abundant on Ugi.
Superb Fruit Dove *Ptilinopus superbus* Seen best on Guadalcanal.
Silver-capped Fruit Dove ◊ *Ptilinopus richardsii* Abundant on Rennell, some on Ugi.
Yellow-bibbed Fruit Dove ◊ *Ptilinopus solomonensis* Only one seen this tour, briefly on Kolombangara.
Claret-breasted Fruit Dove ◊ *Ptilinopus viridis* A regularly encountered pigeon in the forests.
White-headed Fruit Dove ◊ *Ptilinopus eugeniae* Good numbers of this Makira endemic in fruiting trees this year!
Pacific Imperial Pigeon *Ducula pacifica* Common on Rennell only.
Red-knobbed Imperial Pigeon ◊ *Ducula rubricera* Abundant on most islands.
Island Imperial Pigeon ◊ *Ducula pistrinaria* Seen most days in the Western Isles.

Chestnut-bellied Imperial Pigeon ◊ *Ducula brenchleyi* Pleasantly common on Makira this year in fruiting trees!

Pale Mountain Pigeon ◊ *Gymnophaps solomonensis* Glimpsed by some from our camp on Kolombangara.

Buff-headed Coucal ◊ *Centropus milo* Both the Guadalcanal and Western Isles subspecies seen well.

Pacific Koel *Eudynamis orientalis* Heard regularly, seen once or twice.

Pacific Long-tailed Cuckoo ◊ (L-t Koel) *Urodynamis taitensis* One bird rapidly came in then disappeared on Fera.

Shining Bronze Cuckoo *Chrysococcyx lucidus* The Rennell subspecies was seen well, two on Santa Isabel.

Brush Cuckoo *Cacomantis variolosus* One on Guadalcanal on our first day.

Solomons Boobook ◊ *Ninox jacquinoti* We heard all four endemic subspecies, but only had views on Santa Isabel.

Fearful Owl ◊ *Nesasio solomonensis* Some distant calls were as close as we got on Santa Isabel. **(H)**

Solomons Frogmouth ◊ *Rigidipenna inexpectata* Marvelous views of a bird sitting at eye level in some wild ginger!

Solomons Nightjar ◊ *Eurostopodus nigripennis* Some in flight, and one found roosting on Tetepare. Birdquest lifer!

Moustached Treeswift *Hemiprocne mystacea* Commonly encountered, but great looks on Tetepare!

Glossy Swiftlet *Collocalia esculenta* An abundant species on most islands.

White-rumped Swiftlet ◊ *Aerodramus spodiopygius* Just a few on our last day on Makira.

Uniform Swiftlet *Aerodramus vanikorensis* An abundant species throughout.

Oriental Dollarbird *Eurystomus orientalis* Some on Kolombangara, and on Makira.



Moustached Treeswift are always good to see this well!

Ultramarine Kingfisher ◊ *Todiramphus leucopygius* Great views of a pair on Guadalcanal, heard elsewhere.

Melanesian Kingfisher ◊ *Todiramphus tristrami* Seen on a number of islands throughout.

Pacific Kingfisher ◊ *Todiramphus sacer* Only on Rennell on this route, we saw a few well.

Beach Kingfisher *Todiramphus saurophagus* Fantastic looks at this big kingfisher on Tetepare.

Sacred Kingfisher *Todiramphus sanctus* Most common on Rennell, but seen elsewhere.

Common Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis* Just a few on Makira and in the Western Isles.

North Solomons Dwarf Kingfisher ◊ *Ceyx meeki* Great views of this pretty yellow and blue bird on Santa Isabel.

New Georgia Dwarf Kingfisher ◊ *Ceyx collectoris* A few seen briefly in flight on Kolombangara.

Malaita Dwarf Kingfisher ◊ *Ceyx malaitae* One circled us twice in flight on Malaita.

Guadalcanal Dwarf Kingfisher ◊ *Ceyx nigromaxilla* Astounding views of this rarely seen species on Guadalcanal.

Makira Dwarf Kingfisher ◊ *Ceyx gentianus* Common on Makira, offering some really great views!

Little Kingfisher *Ceyx pusillus* One on Tetepare while we were looking at nightjars!
Blyth's Hornbill *Rhyticeros plicatus* Regularly encountered on the larger islands.
Oriental Hobby *Falco severus* One passed overhead on our first morning up on Guadalcanal.
Solomons Cockatoo ◊ *Cacatua ducorpsii* A lovely bird, enjoyable to watch on many islands throughout the tour!
Finsch's Pygmy Parrot ◊ *Micropsitta finschii* Some fantastic encounters on Rennell, also seen elsewhere.
Eclectus Parrot *Eclectus roratus* Common and loud! A lovely species



The Song Parrot is a Melanesian endemic which is best seen in the Solomons! We saw both forms, this one being the nominate..

Song Parrot ◊ (Singing P) *Geoffroyus heteroclitus* Both the nominate, and the HBW split Rennell forms were seen.
Meek's Lorikeet ◊ *Chamosyna meeki* Heard high up in the mist on Kolombangara.
Duchess Lorikeet ◊ *Chamosyna margarethae* Several of these beautiful parrots were found on Kolombangara.
Yellow-bibbed Lory ◊ *Lorius chlorocercus* Another gaudy parrot, seen very well on many of our island visits!
Cardinal Lory ◊ *Pseudeos cardinalis* Most common in the Western Isles, where we had lovely views.
Coconut Lorikeet *Trichoglossus haematodus* Noted throughout.
Black-faced Pitta ◊ *Pitta anerythra* Three different individuals were very obliging this year, and we had great looks!
Cardinal Myzomela ◊ *Myzomela cardinalis* Common on both Rennell and Ugi.
Red-capped Myzomela ◊ *Myzomela lafargei* This one took some time, but a male was seen well on Santa Isabel!
Crimson-rumped Myzomela ◊ (Yellow-vented M) *Myzomela eichhorni* Seen in the Western Isles on a few islands.
Red-vested Myzomela ◊ (Red-bellied M) *Myzomela malaitae* Brief encounters only, but one male and two females.
Black-headed Myzomela ◊ *Myzomela melanocephala* Some real good eye-level views on Guadalcanal.
Sooty Myzomela ◊ *Myzomela tristrami* Abundant on Makira.
Makira Honeyeater ◊ (San Cristobal Melidectes) *Meliarchus sclateri* Daily on Makira, seen well by all in the end!
Fan-tailed Gerygone ◊ *Gerygone flavolateralis* Abundant on Rennell.
Barred Cuckooshrike (Barred C) *Coracina lineata* Noted on numerous islands, especially Rennell.
North Melanesian Cuckooshrike ◊ *Coracina welchmani* One found at our usual spot on Kolombangara.
White-bellied Cuckooshrike *Coracina papuensis* Regularly seen throughout.
Makira Cicadabird ◊ *Edolisoma salomonis* A few pairs on Makira showed nicely.
Solomons Cuckooshrike ◊ *Edolisoma holopolium* Both the Guadalcanal and Malaita subspecies were seen.
Grey-capped Cicadabird ◊ *Edolisoma remotum* Encountered a few times on different islands.



The male Cardinal Myzomela is a beautiful bird commonly seen on Rennell!



Fan-tailed Gerygone are another delightfully common bird on Rennell!



And one more Rennell bird, this one the endemic Rennell Fantail!

- Long-tailed Triller** ◊ *Lalage leucopyga* Fairly common on Makira and Ugi.
- Oriole Whistler** ◊ *Pachycephala orioloides* We saw subspecies on Guadalcanal, Isabel, Kolombangara, and Makira.
- Rennell Whistler** ◊ *Pachycephala feminina* Rennell's rarest endemic, we had a very cooperative individual come in!
- Spangled Drongo** *Dicrurus bracteatus* We briefly saw this likely split a few times on Makira
- Willie Wagtail** *Rhipidura leucophrys* Common throughout.
- Cockerell's Fantail** ◊ (White-winged F) *Rhipidura cockerelli* Subspecies on Guadalcanal, Tetepare, Vella Lavella.
- Makira Fantail** ◊ (Dusky F) *Rhipidura tenebrosa* Superb views of this scarce endemic on Makira.
- Rennell Fantail** ◊ *Rhipidura rennelliana* Quite common on Rennell in feeding flocks.
- Rufous Fantail** *Rhipidura rufifrons* Seen a few times on Guadalcanal, Makira, and Kolombangara.
- Rennell Shrikebill** ◊ *Clytorhynchus hamlini* This striking endemic was seen often on Rennell.
- Solomons Monarch** ◊ (Black-and-white M) *Symposiachrus barbatus* Both subspecies on Guadalcanal and Malaita.
- Kolombangara Monarch** ◊ *Symposiachrus browni* Proved quite common on the way up Kolombangara this year.
- White-collared Monarch** ◊ *Symposiachrus vidua* Lots of individuals seen well on Makira, but sadly none on Ugi.
- Island Monarch** ◊ *Monarcha cinerascens* Just a few on Fera, off Santa Isabel.
- Chestnut-bellied Monarch** ◊ *Monarcha castaneiventris* Seen very well a few times, and also the black form on Ugi.
- White-capped Monarch** ◊ *Monarcha richardsii* One of the world's prettiest monarchs, abundant on Tetepare.
- Steel-blue Flycatcher** ◊ *Myiagra ferrocyanea* The distinct subspecies were seen on all islands within range.
- Makira Flycatcher** ◊ (Ochre-headed F) *Myiagra cervinicauda* Several diagnostic females showed well on Makira.
- Melanesian Flycatcher** ◊ (New Caledonian F) *Myiagra caledonica* Not common on Rennell, but a few seen.
- White-billed Crow** ◊ (Guadalcanal C) *Corvus woodfordi* Fantastic encounters on Guadalcanal and Santa Isabel.
- Pacific Robin** ◊ *Petroica pusilla* One flushed off the side of the path on Makira in the rain did not return. (LO)
- Pacific Swallow** *Hirundo tahitica* Common throughout.
- Shade Bush Warbler** ◊ *Horornis parens* A very friendly individual came to check us out on Makira!
- Makira Leaf Warbler** ◊ (San Cristobal L W) *Phylloscopus makirensis* Quite common in the Makira highlands.
- Kolombangara Leaf Warbler** ◊ *Phylloscopus amoenus* One seen briefly in appalling conditions on Kolombangara.
- Island Leaf Warbler** *Phylloscopus maforensis* The distinct subspecies on Kolombangara was heard only. (H)
- Bare-eyed White-eye** ◊ *Woodfordia superciliosa* Common on Rennell – the first of many white-eyes!
- Yellow-throated White-eye** ◊ *Zosterops metcalfeii* Common on Santa Isabel.
- Rennell White-eye** ◊ *Zosterops rennellianus* Fairly common on Rennell.
- Vella Lavella White-eye** ◊ (Banded W-e) *Zosterops vellalavella* A tricky one, just a few on Vella Lavella.
- Gizo White-eye** ◊ (Splendid W-e) *Zosterops luteirostris* We found two pairs in degraded scrub on Gizo.



The subtly beautiful Rennell Whistler may not be around in a few years if relentless logging continues. We could only find one territory.



Island Thrush is likely to be split soon into a few dozen species. This one will probably become "Rennell" Island Thrush!

Ranongga White-eye ◊ (**Ganongga W-e**) *Zosterops splendidus* Several of these lovely birds on Ranongga.

Solomons White-eye ◊ (**Solomon Islands W-e**) *Zosterops kulambangrae* Multiple birds on Kolombangara.

Dark-eyed White-eye ◊ *Zosterops tetiparius* Abundant around our lodgings on Tetepare.

Kolombangara White-eye ◊ *Zosterops murphyi* Just a few in the swirling mist high up on Kolombangara.

Grey-throated White-eye ◊ *Zosterops rendovae* Only seen well along the river on Makira.

Malaita White-eye ◊ *Zosterops stresemanni* A fairly common inhabitant of the scrub on Malaita.

Metallic Starling *Aplonis metallica* Common and conspicuous in forest.

Singing Starling *Aplonis cantoroides* Common and conspicuous around towns.

Rennell Starling ◊ *Aplonis insularis* A few seen near town, and one in town while waiting for the plane.

White-eyed Starling ◊ *Aplonis brunneicapillus* A great last-minute bird up behind Honiara on our last morning!

Brown-winged Starling ◊ *Aplonis grandis* Common on a few islands, and we saw the white-eyed form on Malaita.

Makira Starling ◊ (**San Cristobal S**) *Aplonis dichroa* A few seen well on Makira.

Long-tailed Myna ◊ *Mino kreffti* Common throughout.

Common Myna (introduced) *Acridotheres tristis* Only around Honiara.

Makira Thrush ◊ (**San Cristobal T**) *Zoothera margaretae* Several brief encounters on Makira, but seen well by all.

Island Thrush *Turdus poliocephalus* Only on Rennell this year, we saw the distinct lowland form.

Midget Flowerpecker ◊ *Dicaeum aeneum* Common on many islands in the Solomons, seen well a few times.

Mottled Flowerpecker ◊ *Dicaeum tristrami* Great looks at a pair on Makira.

Olive-backed Sunbird *Cinnyris jugularis* Common in gardens and clearings throughout.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus* Three seen on Santa Isabel were the only sparrows of the tour!

MAMMALS

Total number of mammal species recorded: 4

Solomons Flying Fox *Pteropus rayneri* The common flying fox throughout, seen best on Guadalcanal.

Rennell Flying Fox *Pteropus rennelli* Some seen on Rennell, with beautiful orange fur!

Pacific Flying Fox *Pteropus tonganus* Common on Rennell – huge creatures!

Umboi Tube-nosed Bat *Nyctimene vizzaccia* Presumably this species was photographed on Tetepare (LO)



Our local guide Mark with us at the Tirotnoga overlook before we left Santa Isabel (very pleased with ourselves indeed!)