



It took several days to get this heart-warming view of the splendid Black-faced Pitta (Lars Petersson)

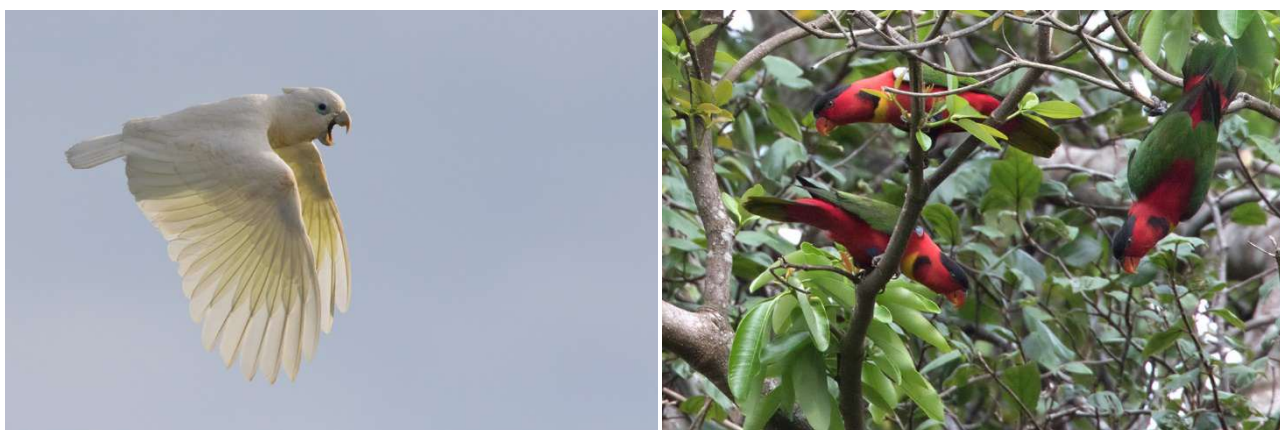
THE SOLOMON ISLANDS

3 – 29 JULY 2015

LEADER: MARK VAN BEIRS

The undisputable Birds of the Trip of the 2015 Solomon Islands tour were Black-faced Pitta, Fearful Owl and Solomons Frogmouth. The pitta because it took several days of hard work to finally see it and the reward was the most amazing eye-ball to eye-ball encounter I have ever had with this very difficult pitta. The magnificent Fearful Owl had not been seen on a Birdquest tour since 2004 and the views of this amazing owl

in its large fig tree, after a sweaty and steep scramble up a sheer limestone ridge were out of this world. The glorious Solomons Frogmouth looks so comically bizarre and unique and behaved so very well. These three most appreciated birds of the tour were all seen on the island of Santa Isabel! Praise also went to the majestic Sanford's Sea Eagle and to the fine-looking Duchess Lorikeet. Our tour total includes a great selection and a large percentage of the endemic birds and specialities. We had good looks at four genera that are endemic to the Solomon Islands (of which two were amongst the highlights of the trip): *Nesasio* (Fearful Owl), *Rigidipenna* (Solomons Frogmouth), *Meliarchus* (Makira Honeyeater) and *Woodfordia* (Bare-eyed White-eye). The Solomon Islands comprise Endemic Bird Areas 198 and 199 and the total area of this archipelago is smaller than Belgium. It has more restricted range species (confined to an area less than 50,000 km²) than any other Endemic Bird Area in the World! This tour is definitely one of our toughest trips through a combination of intense physical effort, unpredictable weather and capricious logistics. The tough hike and overnight high on Kolombangara volcano and the sometimes brutally steep, slippery trails of Santa Isabel will long be remembered by all participants. On the 2015 trip we sure had our share of logistical and weather related problems. We arrived in the islands when Tropical Cyclone Raquel was still strafing the airstrips, so that domestic flights were totally disrupted. We experienced flight delays of one to several days on a number of occasions. Rain was, fortunately, and in contrast to previous tours, never a problem on our hikes or walks. Engine trouble of the regular Malaita – Guadalcanal ferry resulted in an interesting overnight boat trip on a cargo ship. Because of a landowner dispute we, sadly, were unable to visit the highlands of Makira, but, luckily, we managed to see the majority of the Makira specialities in a nice stretch of lowland forest. We birded the islands of Guadalcanal, Rennell, Malaita, Gizo and Makira by road or via logging tracks, cruised into Ranongga and Vella Lavella by boat and trekked up into the forested mountains or hills of Kolombangara and Santa Isabel.



Solomons Cockatoo and Yellow-bibbed Lorries were regularly seen (Lars Petersson)

Our exclusively Scandinavian group gathered at our comfortable hotel in the capital Honiara, situated on Guadalcanal, the most famous island of this Melanesian archipelago, which comprises close to a thousand islands in the southwest Pacific. We first visited Mount Austen, a forested hill just inland from town, where in WWII extremely heavy fighting between the Japanese and the Americans took place. On Guadalcanal more than 7,000 US troops were killed and more than 39,000 Japanese soldiers, sailors and airmen died. Now Mount Austen is a quiet back road lined with just a few houses leading through good forest. On our visit we experienced a fair amount of rain and in the distance we could discern the highest mountain top of the Solomon Islands, the 2,335m high Mount Popomanaseu – home to the mysterious, virtually unknown Moustached Kingfisher... Our first Solomon endemics got our pulses racing as raucous Solomons Cockatoos, tiny Finsch's Pygmy Parrots, very smart-looking Yellow-bibbed Lorries, several modest Black-headed Myzomelas (a Guadalcanal endemic), Oriole Whistler, Chestnut-bellied Monarch, Steel-blue Flycatcher, Brown-winged Starling and Midget Flowerpecker got the bird list started. We heard the extraordinary calls of a Buff-headed Coucal and a patient watch at some fruiting trees revealed the presence of a nice selection of pigeons and doves, including Metallic Pigeon, Mackinlay's Cuckoo-Dove, Superb and gorgeous Claret-breasted Fruit Doves, Red-knobbed Imperial Pigeon and Pale Mountain Pigeon. Overhead we noted Brahminy Kite, scores of Glossy and Uniform Swiftlets and lots of noisy Blyth's Hornbills. A pair of Song Parrots posed in a treetop, allowing us to study the yellow-headed male and the brown-headed female. A party of Yellow-eyed and White-bellied Cuckooshrikes, together with a male Grey-capped Cicadabird

flitted through the canopy, while Rufous Fantail, Metallic Starling, Long-tailed Myna and the widespread Olive-backed Sunbird also made an appearance.



Blyth's Hornbills are widespread in the Solomon Islands (Lars Petersson)

Next morning we were due to fly to the island of Rennell, but an overdose of rain (caused by the tail end of tropical cyclone Raquel) had resulted in a totally waterlogged airstrip on Rennell, so our flight was cancelled, sadly. It kept raining throughout the morning. In the afternoon we wanted to visit the Betikama marsh, but as it belongs to the Seventh Day Adventist University and as it was a Saturday, we were not allowed in, so instead we explored the Botanical Gardens in Honiara. We obtained great looks at very beautiful Yellow-bibbed Lories and at a nice male Superb Fruit Dove. We also managed to scope a pale morph Pied Goshawk showing off its bright orange red eyes. This endemic could then be compared with a more widespread Variable Goshawk, which also posed nicely for us. We added Oriental Dollarbird and Common Kingfisher to the tally and in the hotel grounds found feeding parties of endemic Cardinal Lories and Coconut Lorikeets (split from Rainbow Lorikeet). Eastern Osprey and Greater Crested Tern adorned the waterfront.



The minute Finsch's Pygmy Parrot posed well and Chestnut-bellied Monarchs were regularly encountered (Lars Petersson)

Our hopes of getting to Rennell were dashed again the next morning (no flight), so we returned to the forests of Mount Austen. The whole time we experienced intermittent rain and it was quite misty. A Pied Goshawk showed well again and a pair of majestic Sanford's Sea Eagles soared along a distant ridge. A Stephan's Emerald Dove flew low across the track, several Pale Mountain Pigeons perched up for scope views and we were able to study a minute Finsch's Pygmy Parrot through the scope, wondering what it was feeding on. Several boisterous White-billed Crows showed off their very strange flight and a few gaudy Eclectus Parrots screeched away. The sighting of a lovely Chestnut-bellied Monarch rounded off a successful morning. At midday, a bout of seawatching at our hotel produced Brown Booby, Black Noddy and Greater Crested, Bridled and Common Terns. In the afternoon we paid a visit to the lovely Betikama marsh, where widespread species like Pacific Black Duck, Striated Heron, Great Egret, Little Pied Cormorant, Eastern Osprey, Buff-banded Rail, Australasian Swamphen and Sacred Kingfisher were seen. Several vagrant Intermediate Egrets were feeding in the shallows, but best of all was the spectacle offered by an adult and a large youngster Sanford's Sea Eagle at and around the eyrie. We had a great time admiring this impressive bird of prey both perched and in flight. For several participants this was their final member of the genus *Haliaeetus*. A couple of White-browed Crakes were walking on the floating water lilies and a concerted bashing effort in the grasslands gave us a couple of Red-backed Buttonquail. The endemic race *salomonis* only occurs in the lowlands of northern Guadalcanal. In late afternoon an Oriental Hobby cruised past.



This adult and youngster Sanford's Sea Eagle were the stars of our visit to the Betikama wetland (Lars Petersson)

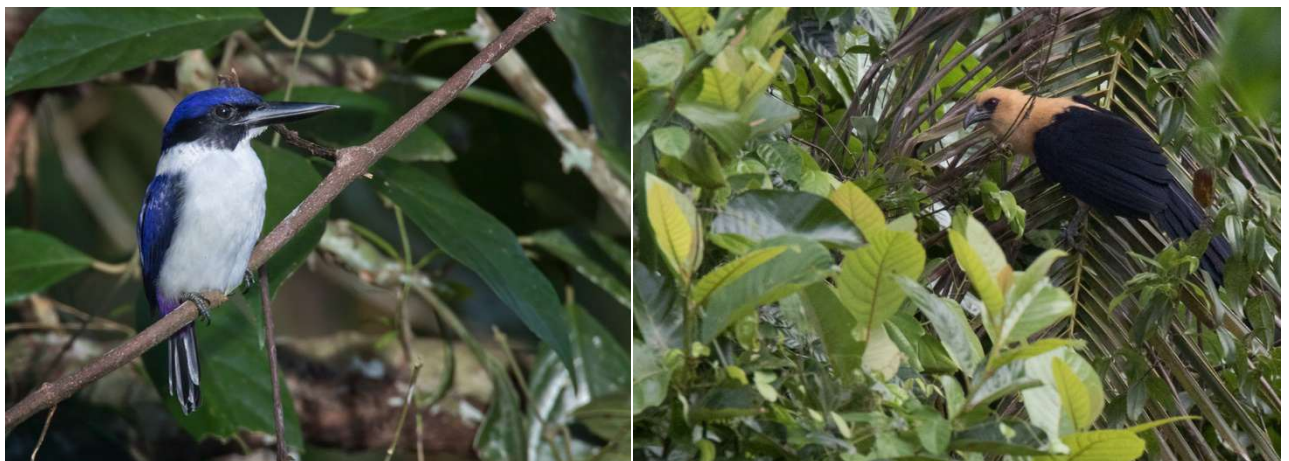
The next morning we finally made it to the Polynesian island of Rennell, where instead of having three days, we had to do with only one. Upon arrival we walked to our favourite guesthouse at the edge of the airstrip and after settling in, explored a wide track through farmbrush and forest. In contrast to previous visits to this paradise island logging was really rampant. Chinese logging companies were very active, as we heard the sound of chainsaws all the time in the distance... so very sad. But, luckily, the endemics performed well. Small flocks of intriguing Bare-eyed White-eyes flitted through the trees. We encountered these different-looking white-eyes of the endemic genus *Woodfordia* (the only other member of the genus lives on the remote Santa Cruz islands) regularly. The delightful Rennell White-eye – a typical *Zosterops* - showed now and then, but it was the attractive Rennell Shrikebill that appealed most of all. This glorious Rennell endemic

betrayed its presence by its distinctive calls and paraded for us on multiple occasions. Several modestly-clad Rennell Starlings were located in treetops where we could observe their diagnostic orange eye colour. Subtly-plumaged Rennell Fantails were very active in the undergrowth drooping their wings and fanning their tails while pursuing their insect prey. Eye-catching Silver-capped Fruit Doves were sunning themselves in the treetops. It took a while to locate the rather unpretentious Rennell Whistler as this endemic kept a low profile deep in the forest, but eventually we all obtained good looks at this most difficult to nail down Rennell endemic. Fat Pacific Imperial Pigeons were easy to see and we regularly encountered Australian White Ibises foraging in farmbrush or glades. Several Lesser Frigatebirds soared overhead and we also saw a couple of Brown Goshawks. Rennell is the only island in the Solomons where this widespread bird of prey occurs. Tiny Fan-tailed Gerygones were frequently seen and we also found the bird it plays host to, the unobtrusive Shining Bronze Cuckoo. Elegant Moustached Tree Swifts posed in dead trees or glided overhead and Song Parrots appeared quite common and very vocal. Flowering bushes held bright Cardinal Myzomelas and we found several Melanesian Flycatchers. Good numbers of impressive Pacific Flying-foxes plied the sky throughout the day and a smaller Rennell Flying-fox was found foraging inside the forest.



Rennell Shrikebill and Bare-eyed White-eye were two of the highlights on Rennell (Lars Petersson)

Although it rained a bit during the night the Twin Otter appeared on time and after observing 13 Pacific Golden Plovers in non-breeding plumage on the airstrip, we flew back to Honiara after our short, but very productive visit. From the air the big scars left by logging and bauxite mining were very obvious and one can only hope the island paradise will survive this aggressive assault.



The smart Ultramarine Kingfisher and the noisy Buff-headed Coucal showed well at Mount Austen (Lars Petersson)

After a relaxed lunch we returned to Mount Austen, which we found very quiet, hot and humid at first. Then we finally heard the glissading calls of an Ultramarine Kingfisher and after some judicious playback we got excellent looks at this localized endemic. Not much later we heard the growling calls of a Buff-headed Coucal and soon obtained good views of this nice endemic as it sat high in the dense canopy of a forest giant. The sun set and when it was dark enough a bit of playback woke up a Solomons Boobook, which soon

showed very well. We experienced glorious moments as the startled owl glared at us from its branch. Great stuff!

Because of a landowner versus government dispute (how very Melanesian!) the airstrip at Auki, the capital of Malaita had been closed for two years now, so we had obtained tickets for the fast ferry. However, upon arrival at the Honiara dock, we learned that our ferry had suffered severe engine trouble and had been cancelled, but luckily we were able to board another ferry which took us swiftly to the town of Auki. The boat was an old Indonesian vessel whose engines made a terrible noise and whose low chimneys produced lots of smoke that sabotaged our seawatching efforts. Donned with earplugs we braved the deck anyway and although viewing conditions were far from ideal we managed to pick up several goodies. Two Wilson's Storm Petrels were found fluttering at the surface of the smooth sea. This was the first observation of this widespread southern migrant for this tour. A single dark morph Wedge-tailed Shearwater showed as did Greater Crested and Black-naped Terns, Black and Brown Noddies and Lesser Frigatebird. Several pods of Indo-Pacific Bottle-nosed Dolphins performed acrobatics. Just before midday we arrived at the wharf of the sleepy village of Auki and transferred to our nearby hotel. After a good lunch and some organizing we birded the surroundings of the disused airstrip, where a pair of Pacific Bazas showed well. Beach Kingfisher and Grey-tailed Tattler adorned the coast and on the way home two Woodford's Rails crossed the track. A splendid ending of our first Malaita day.



This splendid male Red-vested Myzomela took our breath away as it performed beautifully in a flowering tree (Lars Petersson)

Next morning, after an early tasty breakfast we boarded our 4x4 vehicle and drove along the increasingly degraded coastal road to the trans island track where we explored several remaining patches of forest. The first bird that appeared in front of our binoculars was the endemic Malaita White-eye, a robust *Zosterops* without a white orbital ring. A pair of smart Solomons Cuckooshrikes (of the distinctive Malaita race *tricolor*) showed especially well as did both morphs of Pied Goshawk. A flowering tree held scores of Coconut Lorikeets, but best of all was the male Red-vested Myzomela that suddenly appeared. This rare Malaita endemic hadn't been seen by our Birdquest groups for at least 10 years and was a lifer for your happy leader. We also found a female and both sexes interacted quite a bit and offered excellent views! Several Brown-winged Starlings of the white eyed Malaita race *malitae* were loafing about. We heard a Brush Cuckoo and on the way home we were lucky enough to be able to admire a pair of Woodford's Rails with two

small chicks on the track. Delightful moments. Not much later another rail was seen bathing in a roadside puddle and here we could discern the tiny wings of this flightless species.



The undescribed race of Woodford's Rail and the unique Crested Cuckoo Dove: two of our favourite birds on Malaita (Lars Petersson)

The news arrived that the ferry we had booked had been cancelled due to engine failure, so the only way out of Malaita was on an overnight cargoship. We spent another pleasant morning in the forested foothills of northern Malaita and obtained very good looks at a pair of Solomons Monarchs of the distinctive race *malaitae*. A Crested Cuckoo Dove flew in in response to the tape and showed off its distinctive crazy crest. This was to remain our only observation of this remarkable endemic on the tour. A male Oriole Whistler of the race *sanfordi* (sporting no breastband) was accompanied by obliging Chestnut-bellied Monarchs and Steel-blue Flycatchers. A flowering tree was overflowing with stylish Yellow-bibbed Fruit Doves, Coconut Lorikeets and Yellow-bibbed Lories. We had great looks again at the pair of Red-vested Myzomelas and several Malaita White-eyes. We relaxed in the afternoon and in the evening we boarded the cargo ship Cosco. The decks, stairs, gangways and floors of the boat were literally full of people, but luckily we were given a separate room filled with stacks of telephone directories. It was quite hot and stuffy, but we were glad we had our own space. The boat trip was quite an experience and luckily we were only told after arriving at Honiara about the December 2013 ferry disaster, whereby a ferry going to Malaita capsized with 400 people on board who all survived. After a rather uncomfortable night we arrived in Honiara with just enough time to re-organize our luggage and catch the Sol Air flight to the island of Gizo in the Western Province.



Our night aboard the cargoship amongst telephone directories (Mark Van Beirs); the Gizo White-eye is endangered (Lars Petersson)

We arrived in Gizo in mid-morning and transferred to our waterfront hotel where we enjoyed a good brunch. The islands of the Western Province (the New Georgia group of islands) were once famous (or infamous) for their strong association with head hunting whereby the status of a man depended on the number of heads he had collected. The practice was wiped out only in the 1930's. In the afternoon we explored a quiet back road near town and in between showers we picked up the rather splendid Gizo White-eye, which is restricted to this small island. It definitely is one of the better looking white-eyes and easily the most threatened and rarest bird we would get to see on the tour. A family party of fine-looking White-capped Monarchs (adult,

subadult and juvenile) and a pair of dainty Crimson-rumped Myzomelas escorted the white-eye. A dark morph Pacific Reef Heron was feeding along the coast and a Sanford's Sea Eagle glided past. Island Imperial Pigeons, a Collared Kingfisher of the race *alberti* and lots of Cardinal Lories added to the enjoyment of our outing.



A rare Heinroth's Shearwater (Lars Petersson); Black Noddy, Bridled Tern and Brown Noddy resting on some flotsam (Mark Van Beirs)

Next day was island hopping day and on the way to distant Ranongga island our swift boat followed several feeding flocks of Black Noddies while zigzagging all over the sea. We located several parties of these elegant seabirds and eventually found a single rarely-seen Heinroth's Shearwater. We had brief, but good looks at this little-known seabird. The smooth seas also yielded Bridled Tern, Brown Noddy, a single dark morph Wedge-tailed Shearwater, several pods of Indo-Pacific Bottle-nosed Dolphins and a few flying fishes. We arrived at our favourite village on Ranongga, met old friends and walked into the nearby farmbrush where we soon heard the distinctive song of the Ranongga White-eye. It took a while before we all managed to get satisfactory looks at our endemic quarry. A singing bird posed long enough for good scope studies, so we could appreciate the use of the scientific epithet *splendidus*. A Cockerell's Fantail showed briefly and we were then treated to a tasty snack in the village where we were told about the 2007 earthquake that lifted the island three meters out of the Pacific Ocean and caused an expansion of its shoreline by up to 70 meters. Soon we were on our way to the nearby, large island of Vella Lavella where we landed in a lovely bay. While we were munching our sandwiches on the beach we found a pair of Beach Stone-curlews feeding on the exposed reef. Scanning the mangroves produced a cute Little Kingfisher and we heard several Melanesian Megapodes call. We walked into the extensive coconut groves, which were interspersed with patches of shrubby growth. Except for the numerous Cardinal Lories it was extremely quiet, hot and humid, but after a couple of hours we finally found the Vella Lavella White-eye. Sadly, the bird didn't stay around and disappeared all too quickly. Stephan's Emerald Dove, Buff-headed Coucal and Crimson-rumped Myzomela were also about and an impressive Painted Moray Eel was hunting in the shallows. On the return journey we explored a sandy islet where lots of Black-naped Terns, several Great Crested Terns and good numbers of Black Noddies roosted. We had a great time snorkelling at a lovely reef with many splendid coral fish and some fun White-tipped Reef Sharks. It had been a great day.



Beach Stone-curlew and Ranongga White-eye were some of the highlights on our island hopping day (Lars Petersson)

Early next morning our boat took us to the volcano island of Kolombangara. In the distance we could see famous Kennedy island, where, in 1943 lieutenant John Kennedy saved most of the crew of his Patrol Torpedo boat after it had been rammed by a Japanese destroyer. Read the whole story at <http://www.jfklibrary.org/JFK/JFK-in-History/John-F-Kennedy-and-PT109.aspx>. We were met by our man on the spot, who took us straight away to the current favourite area of the Roviana Rails and we were not disappointed. Three of these fairly recently described (1991) birds were feeding in a garden behind a house and showed very well. Another flightless rail for the tally! While hanging about a family party of North Melanesian Cuckooshrikes and a couple of Solomon White-eyes appeared. We then walked about in the lowland forest and farmbush, admired a colony of Solomon Flying-foxes, saw two more North Melanesian Cuckooshrikes and found a gorgeous, perched Duchess Lorikeet. What a stunner. A vagrant Intermediate Egret foraged in the sweet potato fields. As it started to heat up, we settled into our guest house on the waterfront which offered a splendid view of the Kolombangara volcano. We relaxed or went snorkelling with White-tipped and Black-tipped Reef Sharks. In the afternoon we walked along the track leading towards the volcano. Several Duchess Lorikeets were seen in flight and only briefly perched. A lively flock held smart White-capped Monarchs, several Solomon White-eyes, a pair of Kolombangara Monarchs, two Cockerell Fantails and a Crimson-rumped Myzomela. Three Buff-headed Coucals growled and showed particularly well. A Variable Kingfisher called from the undergrowth and a Nankeen Night Heron appeared at dusk. We enjoyed dinner on the waterfront while a Pacific Koel called.



The flightless Roviana proved easy to find this year (Lars Petersson); Kolombangara volcano at dawn (Mark Van Beirs)

Kolombangara is a possibly active stratovolcano that forms the almost perfectly round, 15 km diameter Kolombangara Island. Its name in the local language roughly translates to "Water Lord", referring to the many rivers and streams that drain its flanks. At dawn we started walking up the volcano, first through farmbush where a Roviana Rail traversed our trail. We then crossed a refreshing river, flushed a Nankeen Night Heron, walked through some old growth forest and soon hit an disused logging road which we followed for a few hours. Several of the bridges had collapsed since our last visit, so we needed to detour through the marshy forest on a regular basis. The recent cyclone Raquel had left quite a few trees uprooted, which didn't make life easier, as we had to clamber about quite a bit. Our guides had to use their machetes all the time as the little used trail was often blocked. A party of Pale Mountain Pigeons obliged and a nice flock of Kolombangara White-eyes and several Kolombangara Monarchs showed well. Jonas observed a Meyer's Goshawk. Eventually, in mid-afternoon, we reached our camp, a small grassy clearing at about 1,000m altitude and as soon as the tents were up, it started raining. At the camp several flocks of Meek's Lorikeets flew past and an Oriole Whistler obliged beautifully. Our cook had a hard time keeping the fire going, but eventually managed to prepare some tasty hot food for our exhausted bodies. The heavy rain soon got our tents rather wet inside but we all managed one way or another.



Our camp high up on Kolombangara volcano; the world famous Marovo lagoon (Mark Van Beirs)

After a not very comfortable night four intrepid Birdquesters climbed up the volcano till they reached the gnarled forest near the rim where eventually two Kolombangara Leaf Warblers were seen in the swirling mist. A great reward after some really hard work!! Several flocks of Kolombangara White-eyes were also encountered. The rest of the day was spent walking down Kolombangara volcano. A few showers provided refreshment and in late afternoon a tired and happy bunch arrived at our little guesthouse, waved goodbye to our gracious hosts and helpful porters and took the boat to the comfortable hotel in Gizo for a major clean up job, a hot shower and a tasty dinner.

Next day, in mid-morning, we took the return flight to Honiara, while admiring the well-known World Heritage Marovo lagoon from the air. In the afternoon we relaxed, let our camping gear and clothes dry out and got organized for the next chapter.



The birdy Betikama wetland near Honiara (Mark Van Beirs); A fabulous Sanford's Sea Eagle (Lars Petersson)

The following morning we were waiting at Honiara airport for the flight to Santa Isabel and at first the flight was delayed, and then again delayed and by midday the dreaded news came through that the flight was cancelled due to excessive rain at the Fera airstrip. We returned to town, checked in again at our hotel and in the afternoon revisited the lovely Betikama wetland at the edge of town. We spent quite some time admiring the inspiring Sanford's Sea Eagles at their eyrie. The fully fledged youngster was being fed by an adult offering a splendid spectacle. A Nankeen Night Heron showed beautifully, several vagrant Intermediate and Eastern Cattle Egrets caught our attention, White-browed Crakes performed very nicely and healthy numbers of Solomons Cockatoos created a lovely atmosphere.



White-billed Crows have a strange fluttering flight (Mark Van Beirs); the fabulous Solomons Frogmouth is a fantastic creature (Lars Petersson)

Next morning we finally flew to the small offshore island of Fera, just off Santa Isabel. Upon arrival we were greeted by a Beach Stone-curlew in flight and by our local trustworthy guides. A short boat trip took us to the town of Buala and soon we made our way up to the village of Tirotonga. It took two sweaty hours along a slippery trail to get up to the village, which is situated at an altitude of 550m. Several Yellow-throated White-eyes, a Pacific Baza, a glimpsed Woodford's Rail and a White-billed Crow provided some distraction. We settled in, enjoyed a scrumptious lunch and in the afternoon we explored the surroundings of the village along slick, uneven trails through hilly limestone country. We heard the characteristic calls of Black-faced Pitta, one of our main targets, at three locations, but there was no response at all, yet... An after dinner nightwalk resulted in spectacular looks at a fabulous Solomons Frogmouth at close range. We really appreciated the fantastic views of this truly bizarre bird, so different looking from other frogmouths that it has been placed in its own genus. We also heard a Solomons Boobook.



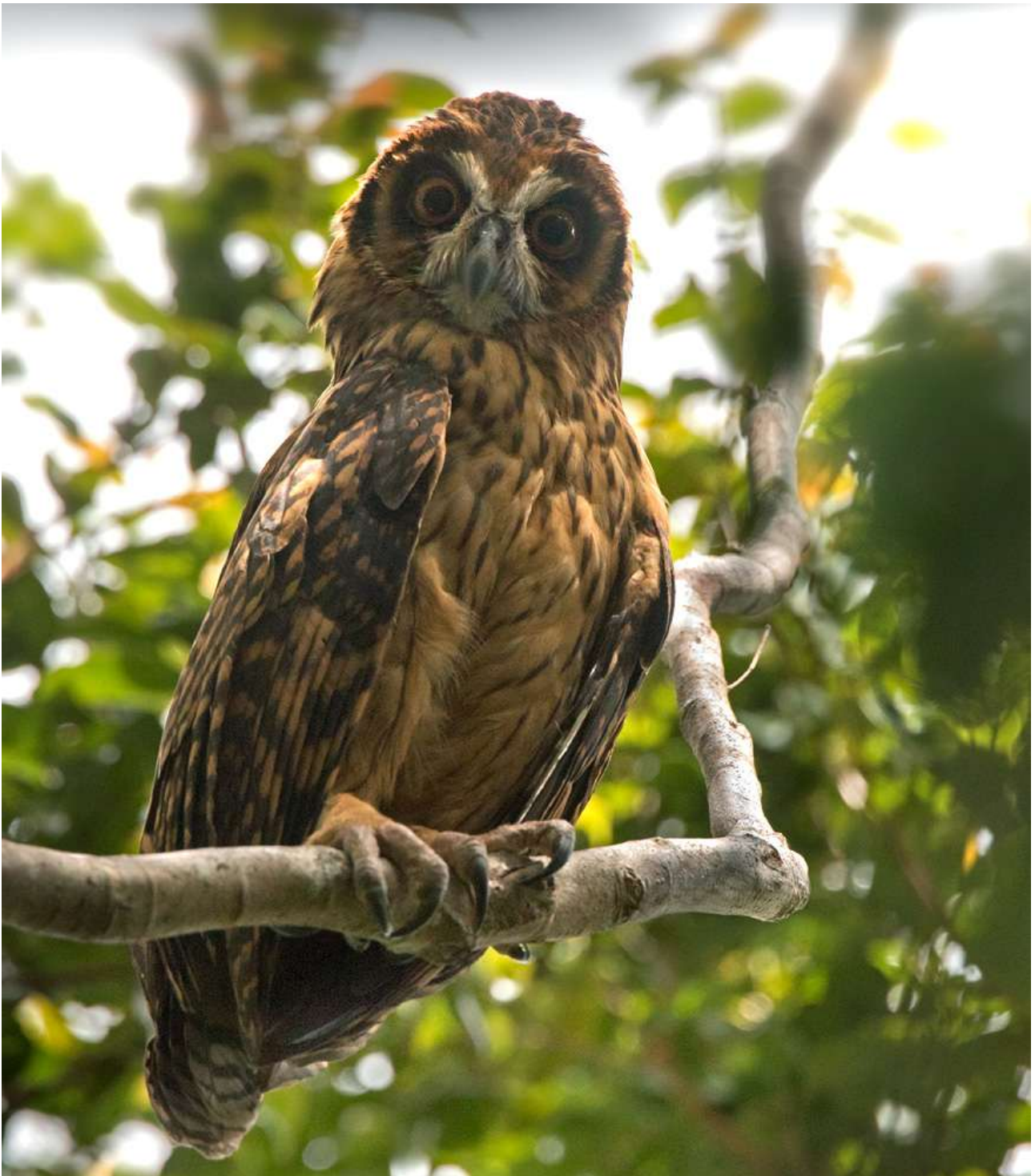
The adorable Solomons Boobook posed near its nesthole (Lars Petersson)

Just after dawn we checked one of the pitta territories and soon heard the mournful call emanate from the other side of a steep gully. We kept trying and waiting, and after quite a while the bird came closer and was briefly glimpsed by some of the group, after which all went quiet. Quite frustrating, but from previous experience we knew this was normal procedure with this species. We checked two other territories, but no luck there. Prolonged stops at viewpoints gave us several nice White-billed Crows, a pretty female Red-capped Myzomela and some Yellow-throated White-eyes. In late morning we decided to check out a known roost of a Solomons Boobook and sure enough the bird flushed from its nesthole and perched up in one of the higher trees for us to admire. The scope and the cameras had a delightfully busy time!! We relaxed a bit during the hotter hours of the day, as the trails were quite hard work, being very slippery, narrow, uneven and steep. But, not too long after lunch we were taken on a stiff walk to a known occupied nest of a Fearful Owl in a huge strangler fig. Upon arrival we looked and scanned, full of hope, in the canopy of this giant tree but couldn't discern anything. The local landowner climbed up the tree (amazing!) and soon reported that the nest situated in a clump of epiphytic ferns was empty. We searched the surrounding forest and lingered about without much hope. A Sanford's Sea Eagle glided over being mobbed by a bunch of White-billed Crows and soon we headed for a different pitta territory. A bird called in the distance and it probably approached a bit, but that was it.



Both the endemic Pied Goshawk and the more widespread Variable Goshawk were regularly seen (Lars Petersson)

Another dawn, another pitta territory. We continued checking out suitable-looking pitta areas, but only managed to hear it faintly. In late morning we arrived at a terrific viewpoint where we spent several hours scanning for birds of prey and whatever else would show. A pair of imposing Sanford's Sea Eagles circled majestically high into the sky. Several Pied Goshawks flew past (several adults and a single immature bird), as did two Variable Goshawks. Brahminy Kites were being mobbed by White-billed Crows, but sadly no sign of the very rare Imitator Sparrowhawk... one could only hope... We scoped a male Red-capped Myzomela and a pair of cooperative Ultramarine Kingfishers. And then the news came in that a nest had been located of a Fearful Owl. After a quick al fresco lunch we made our way to the site high up on a steep limestone outcrop. We hiked up along a very slippery, slimy trail, scrambled on all fours along a sharp karst ridge and soon stared into the canopy of a large fig tree, where a beautiful Fearful Owl sat staring at us. Unbelievable!! We were told by the local landowner that she had a nest in one of the fern clumps containing two tiny chicks, so we gorged ourselves on perfect views of this magnificent creature, admired her enormous claws and fantastic facial pattern and soon left her to care for her precious offspring. Terrific, much cherished moments! After a break in the middle of the day we continued our pitta search, but only heard one far away. A happy group went to bed dreaming of that amazing Fearful Owl.



Observing this splendid Fearful Owl was one of the most memorable experiences of the trip (Lars Petersson)

We were getting a bit desperate about the pitta, so our guides advised us to walk to a more distant patch of forest where pittas were 'plentiful'. So we did and in the early morning, after a rather stiff hike on devious trails, found ourselves in a stretch of beautiful forest on rolling limestone hills. We soon heard several of our targets, but response was poor and only one of us managed a glimpse. After spending most of the morning trying for this mega elusive bird, we returned to our favourite viewpoint, feeling rather downhearted. We spent the hotter hours of the day scanning for birds of prey and had great views of a pair of Sanford's Sea Eagles, of an Oriental Hobby and of several Pied Goshawks. In mid-afternoon we checked an area where we had heard a pitta before and this time we got a strong response. After some strategic positioning and excited waiting, we all got excellent looks at this beauty. Full of adrenaline we savoured the glorious moments of our victory over one of the most difficult members of a bird family, famous for its skulking behaviour. Lars managed to get some really great photos. A splendid conclusion of the Santa Isabel chapter!

A very happy group returned to base. After dark some of us tried again for the Frogmouth, but not a sniff was heard, sadly.



The group on Santa Isabel and a beautiful rainbow from the islet of Fera (Mark Van Beirs)

Next morning, after packing up, we took some group photos at the classic viewpoint at the edge of the village and slid down along the muddy trail to sea level. A Pacific Baza and a Variable Goshawk posed nicely. Solomon Airlines had changed the time of our flight to the afternoon, so we had a bit more time on the islet of Fera than we wanted. We strolled about the airstrip and scoped a nice assortment of waders which included 11 Pacific Golden Plovers, two Eurasian Whimbrel, a Common Sandpiper and a Ruddy Turnstone. We flushed a Melanesian Megapode and observed a white morph Pacific Reef Heron, two Beach Kingfishers and several Island Monarchs, but best of all was the unexpected Pacific Long-tailed Cuckoo that played hide and seek in the undergrowth. We had seen this rare visitor from New Zealand only once before on this tour, at exactly the same spot! We said goodbye to our amiable hosts and returned to the hub of Honiara, where a Red-footed Booby was seen by some along the waterfront of our hotel.

During our full day on Guadalcanal we explored a new site and walked along a recently developed logging road north of town, which offered nice open vistas over selectively logged forest and some farmbrush. Nothing new was seen, but we had nice views of Metallic Pigeon, Buff-headed Coucal, Ultramarine Kingfisher, Yellow-bibbed Lory, Black-headed Myzomela, Midget Flowerpecker and some nest-building Brown-winged Starlings.



Guadalcanal forest (Mark Van Beirs); the cute and minute Midget Flowerpecker (Lars Petersson)

Our midday flight to Kira Kira, the capital of the island of Makira (San Cristobal) went without a hitch. Upon arrival we were met by our local mister fix-it who told us the highland area where we had planned to hike to was a no go area because of a landowners dispute. Damn! "Welcome to Melanesia!" We quickly changed the program and made our way to a cozy house not too far from town at the edge of some nice forest. We settled in and in the afternoon explored the surroundings. The forest was in good shape, but trails were non-existent, making birding quite challenging. We flushed a Melanesian Megapode, but the best birds were

seen at a forest edge overlook where Yellow-bibbed Fruit Dove, an all too brief White-headed Fruit Dove, a Peregrine, Cardinal Myzomela, Rufous Fantail, a couple of endemic smart White-collared Monarchs and several endemic Mottled Flowerpeckers showed. The accommodation was fair, but rather cramped and our pleasant hosts provided some great food.



The gorgeous White-headed Fruit Dove and the Sooty Myzomela are specialties of the island of Makira (Lars Petersson)

The following morning we reconnoitred a nearby recently abandoned logging track which offered much better birding conditions. The forest was excellent and several great lookout points ensured enjoyable birding. On our first walk we already found a great selection of the lowland specialties of Makira. We scoped several adorable, very attractive White-headed Fruit Doves and also studied some more subtly-clad Chestnut-bellied Imperial Pigeons in detail. Sooty and Cardinal Myzomelas favoured flowering bushes as did a pair of Makira Cicadabirds. A family party of vociferous Makira Honeyeaters (the old San Cristobal Melidectes) performed well. This peculiar species has now been placed in its own genus (*Meliarchus*). A pair of White-collared Monarchs was feeding their youngsters and an alluring Variable Kingfisher (of the distinctive race *gentianus*) perched beautifully in the undergrowth. A couple of Spangled Drongos (of the distinctive Makira race *longirostris*) flitted through the subcanopy and we flushed a tiny Bronze Ground Dove from a trail. A Pacific Baza wanted to be seen and good numbers of Red-knobbed Imperial Pigeons were enjoying the sunrays in the treetops. A male Lesser Frigatebird flew overhead and in the afternoon we moved to better accommodation in town as conditions were a bit cramped and basic at our village house.



The Makira race (gentianus) of the Variable Kingfisher obliged and the Makira Honeyeater played hide and seek (Lars Petersson)

We spent the next day along the logging track and inside the forest and added a few more goodies to the tally. We managed to entice a couple of Pale-vented Bush-hens to cross a farmbrush trail, whereby we got

fair looks at this rarely seen skulker. A party of Long-tailed Trillers called from the treetops and although this species is widespread in New Caledonia and Vanuatu, it is strangely restricted to the island of Makira in the Solomons. Several Makira Starlings posed well in their nesting tree and we had more good looks at Chestnut-bellied Imperial Pigeon, Variable Kingfisher and Makira Cicadabird.

The following morning we stayed mainly inside the forest, looking for the very few specialities we were still missing. We heard a few call notes of a Makira Flycatcher, but it remained hidden in the canopy. A few lucky souls managed to catch a glimpse of a Yellow-legged Pigeon flying through the subcanopy and although we waited in the area, it didn't show again. We encountered several flocks containing both White-collared and Chestnut-bellied Monarchs, Spangled Drongo, Oriole Whistler and Sooty Myzomela and the fruiting trees held Red-knobbed and Chestnut-bellied Imperial Pigeons and Yellow-bibbed and White-headed Fruit Doves. In the afternoon we opted to walk to the airstrip but nothing of note was seen.



We had multiple observations of subtly-plumaged Chestnut-bellied Imperial Pigeons and the black 'ugiensis' race of the Chestnut-bellied Monarch showed well on Ugi island (Lars Petersson)

The island of Ugi, some 15 km away from Makira holds several interesting races of Makira specialities and as there was little else to find for us in the lowlands of Makira, some resolute Birdquesters travelled by boat to the island, where the *squamulatus* race of White-collared Monarch and the aptly named black *ugiensis* race of Chestnut-bellied Monarch showed well. The dark *ugiensis* subspecies of the widespread Rufous Fantail also performed and a female Makira Flycatcher was finally ticked. Nothing of note was seen on the sea trips. In the afternoon some of us returned to the logging track and the undisputed highlight of a very quiet afternoon were two rare Yellow-legged Pigeons that showed well in flight! A Sanford's Sea Eagle sailed leisurely past. In the evening we contemplated what we had missed in the lowland forests and only Makira Fantail was lacking on our list. By not being able to visit the highlands we had totally lost our chances for Shade Bush Warbler, Makira Leaf Warbler and White-bellied Thrush. A pity, but...

On the last day of the tour we waited quite anxiously for the flight to Honiara, but luckily all went smoothly and upon arrival we were welcomed by a dashing Oriental Hobby on the airport tower.

We saw an amazing selection of endemics and specialities and the 2015 group was a real joy to be with. I would happily take that easy going, flexible and very keen bunch of birders anywhere on our planet.



The marvellously bizarre Solomons Frogmouth posed so very well (Lars Petersson)

SYSTEMATIC LIST OF SPECIES RECORDED DURING THE TOUR

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).

Conservation threat categories and information are taken from *Threatened Birds of the World*, BirdLife International's magnificent book on the sad status of the rarest 10% of the world's avifauna, and updates on the BirdLife website: <http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/home>

E = Endangered, **V** = Vulnerable, **NT** = Near Threatened

Pacific Black Duck *Anas superciliosa* Small numbers were seen on most islands.

Melanesian Megapode (M Scrubfowl) ◊ *Megapodius eremita* Seen on a couple of occasions, but more often heard.

Wilson's Storm Petrel *Oceanites oceanicus* Fair looks at 2 from the Honiara – Auki ferry. A new species for the tour.

Wedge-tailed Shearwater *Puffinus pacificus* Two observations of dark morph birds.

Heinroth's Shearwater ◊ *Puffinus heinrothi* **VU** A single bird on our island hopping day near Gizo. See Note.



Rennell is home to the pygmaeus race of the Australian White Ibis; Brown Boobies were regularly encountered (Mark Van Beirs)

Australian White Ibis *Threskiornis moluccus* The endemic race *pygmaeus* is a common sight on Rennell.

Nankeen Night Heron (Rufous N H) *Nycticorax caledonicus* Just a few observations of this widespread species.

Striated Heron *Butorides striata* Five encounters with the race *solomonensis*.

Eastern Cattle Egret *Bubulcus coromandus* Three of these vagrants showed well in a marsh near Honiara.

Great Egret *Ardea alba* Four observations of this well-known bird.

Intermediate Egret *Egretta intermedia* Several were seen near Honiara and a single on Kolombangara. A vagrant.

Pacific Reef Heron (P Reef-Egret) *Egretta sacra* Regular sightings of both dark and white morphs.

Lesser Frigatebird *Fregata ariel* A fairly common species all over the islands. 16 together near Kira Kira was nice.

Red-footed Booby *Sula sula* (NL) A pale morph bird was seen fishing in Honiara harbour.

Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster* A scattering of observations, mainly in the Western Province.

Little Pied Cormorant *Microcarbo melanoleucos* A common species of the Honiara area.

Eastern Osprey *Pandion cristatus* Eight observations of this attractive piscivore.

Pacific Baza (Crested Hawk) *Aviceda subcristata* Many observations. We also witnessed some lovely display.

Variable Goshawk *Accipiter hiogaster* Regular encounters. Strangely absent from Makira.



We saw the Pacific Baza on most islands; just a handful of Brown Noddies were identified amongst the more common Blacks (Mark Van Beirs)

Brown Goshawk *Accipiter fasciatus* Two on Rennell, the only place in the Solomons where this species occurs.

Pied Goshawk ♦ *Accipiter albogularis* 24 observations of this handsome endemic, including several dark morphs.

Meyer's Goshawk ♦ *Accipiter meyerianus* (NL) Jonas saw one of these high up on Kolombangara. Always a toughie.

Brahminy Kite *Haliastur indus* Many sightings of this widespread bird of prey (*flavirostris*).

Sanford's Sea Eagle ♦ (Solomons S E/Fish E) *Haliaeetus sanfordi* V 26 observations of this endemic. See Note.

Woodford's Rail ♦ *Nesoclopeus woodfordi* Good looks at several on Malaita and glimpsed on Isabel. See Note.

Buff-banded Rail *Gallirallus philippensis* Just a few observations.

Roviana Rail ♦ *Gallirallus rovianae* NT Splendid looks at foraging birds in the Kolombangara lowlands. See Note.

Pale-vented Bush-hen (Rufous-tailed B-h) *Amaurornis moluccana* Two showed uncharacteristically well on Makira.

White-browed Crake *Porzana cinerea* Excellent scope studies of several near Honiara.

Australasian Swamphen *Porphyrio melanotus* Regular encounters.

Red-backed Buttonquail *Turnix maculosus* Fair looks at two of the race *salomonis* in the Guadalcanal lowlands.

Beach Stone-curlew (B Thick-knee) *Esacus magnirostris* NT Four encounters with this much wanted wader.

Pacific Golden Plover *Pluvialis fulva* Small numbers of these migrants were seen on airstrips.

Eurasian Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* Just a few were tallied.

Grey-tailed Tattler *Tringa brevipes* NT A single bird showed well at the Auki airstrip.

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos* A single bird was seen on Fera, near Santa Isabel.

Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres* A single bird was seen with other waders on Fera, near Santa Isabel.

Brown Noddy *Anous stolidus* Regular in small numbers on our boat trips in the Western Province.

Black Noddy *Anous minutus* Many sightings of this elegant seabird.

Greater Crested Tern (Great C T, Swift T) *Thalasseus bergii* Small numbers were seen throughout the islands.

Bridled Tern *Onychoprion anaethetus* Regularly seen, sometimes at close range.

Black-naped Tern *Sterna sumatrana* Perfect looks on several occasions of this attractive tern.

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo* This migrant was regularly seen in small numbers.

Metallic Pigeon *Columba vitiensis* We recorded this spp. on Guadalcanal, Kolombangara, Santa Isabel and Makira.

Yellow-legged Pigeon ♦ *Columba pallidiceps* V Fair looks at this much appreciated rarity in Makira's lowland forest.

Mackinlay's Cuckoo-Dove ♦ *Macropygia mackinlayi* Regular observations of this tramp species.

Crested Cuckoo-Dove ♦ *Reinwardtoena crassirostris* NT Cracking looks at one in hill forest on Malaita.

Stephan's Emerald Dove *Chalcophaps stephani* Regular sightings.

Bronze Ground Dove *Gallicolumba beccarii* We flushed one of these tiny critters in lowland forest on Makira.

Superb Fruit Dove *Ptilinopus superbis* Several excellent sightings of this smart species.



The Silver-capped Fruit Dove is a speciality of Rennell; the Guadalcanal form of Solomons Boobook is sometimes considered a separate species (Lars Petersson)

Silver-capped Fruit Dove ♦ *Ptilinopus richardsii* This beauty was fairly common on Rennell.

Yellow-bibbed Fruit Dove ♦ *Ptilinopus solomonensis* Regular encounters with this very smart-looking dove.

Claret-breasted Fruit Dove ♦ *Ptilinopus viridis* The most commonly encountered *Ptilinopus* in the Solomons.

White-headed Fruit Dove ♦ *Ptilinopus eugeniae* NT Regular observations of this magnificent bird on Makira.

Pacific Imperial Pigeon *Ducula pacifica* Fairly common on Rennell.

Red-knobbed Imperial Pigeon ♦ *Ducula rubricera* NT Many encounters. Great voice and splendid looks!

Island Imperial Pigeon ♦ *Ducula pistrinaria* Small numbers were noted on most island groups.

Chestnut-bellied Imperial Pigeon ♦ *Ducula brenchleyi* V Repeated cracking scope studies in the forests of Makira.

Pale Mountain Pigeon ♦ *Gymnophaps solomonensis* We saw small parties on Guadalcanal and on Kolombangara.

Buff-headed Coucal ♦ *Centropus milo* Regular on Guadalcanal, Gizo, Ranongga and Kolombangara. See Note.

Pacific Koel *Eudynamis orientalis* (H) We heard it on several islands.

Pacific Long-tailed Cuckoo ♦ (L-t Koel) *Urodynamis taitensis* A single bird on Fera islet, off Isabel. Unexpected.

Shining Bronze Cuckoo *Chrysococcyx lucidus* Nice looks at the endemic race *harterti* on Rennell.

Brush Cuckoo *Cacomantis variolosus* Just a few records.

West Solomons Boobook ♦ *Ninox [jacquinoti] jacquinoti* Lovely daytime sightings near our base on Santa Isabel.

Guadalcanal Boobook ♦ *Ninox [jacquinoti] granti* V Cracking looks at a responsive bird near Honiara.



Fearful Owls have enormous claws; the Moustached Treeswift is probably the most elegant bird in the Solomons (Lars Petersson)

Fearful Owl ♦ *Nesasio solomonensis* V Unforgettable moments with a female at the nest in the Santa Isabel hills.

Solomons Frogmouth ♦ (Solomon Islands F) *Rigidipenna inexpectata* NT Magical looks on Santa Isabel. See Note.

Moustached Treeswift *Hemiprocne mystacea* Regular observations of this superbly elegant species.

Glossy Swiftlet *Collocalia esculenta* A common inhabitant of all the visited islands.

White-rumped Swiftlet ♦ *Aerodramus spodiopygius* Good looks at several on Kolombangara.

Uniform Swiftlet *Aerodramus vanikorensis* Common throughout.

Oriental Dollarbird *Eurystomus orientalis* Regular encounters with the race *solomonensis*.

Ultramarine Kingfisher ♦ *Todirhamphus leucopygius* This endemic showed well on Guadalcanal and Santa Isabel.

Collared Kingfisher *Todirhamphus chloris* Many sightings of this vociferous species. See Note.

Beach Kingfisher *Todirhamphus saurophagus* Regular observations along the coasts. Always a joy to watch.



A formidable Beach Kingfisher (Mark Van Beirs); the salomonensis race of the Common Kingfisher (Lars Petersson)

Sacred Kingfisher *Todirhamphus sanctus* Small numbers of this Australian migrant were encountered.

Common Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis* Regular observations of the race *salomonensis*.

Variable Kingfisher (V Dwarf K) *Ceyx lepidus* We recorded this tiny critter on several islands. See Note.
Little Kingfisher *Ceyx pusillus* One showed quite well on Vella Lavella (*richardsi*).
Blyth's Hornbill (Papuan H) *Rhyticeros plicatus* Regular observations. Remarkably absent from Makira.
Oriental Hobby *Falco severus* Several observations of this dashing species.
Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* One showed well on Makira. The race involved is probably *ernesti*.
Solomons Cockatoo ♦ (Ducorps's C) *Cacatua ducorpsii* Many excellent observations of this Solomon endemic.
Finsch's Pygmy Parrot ♦ *Micropsitta finschii* Regular splendid sightings of this remarkable species.



Good numbers of Cardinal Lories were seen, but just a few exquisite Duchess Lorikeets were encountered (Lars Petersson)

Cardinal Lory ♦ *Chalcopsitta cardinalis* Many very nice observations of this lovely species.
Coconut Lorikeet *Trichoglossus haematodus* A regular bird in the lowlands.
Yellow-bibbed Lory ♦ *Lorius chlorocercus* These very smart-looking endemics were quite commonly recorded.
Meek's Lorikeet ♦ *Charmosyna meeki* NT We saw several parties high up on Kolombangara. See Note.
Duchess Lorikeet ♦ *Charmosyna margarethae* NT Exquisite scope views on Kolombangara. See Note.
Song Parrot ♦ (Singing P) *Geoffroyus heteroclitus* Regular encounters with this noisy species.
Eclectus Parrot *Eclectus roratus* Fairly common still all over the Solomon Islands. A splendid species!
Black-faced Pitta ♦ *Pitta anerythra* V Terrific views, eventually, of this mega bird on Santa Isabel. See Note.
Cardinal Myzomela ♦ *Myzomela cardinalis* Common on Rennell and on Makira.
Red-capped Myzomela ♦ (Scarlet-naped M) *Myzomela lafargei* Three nice sightings on Santa Isabel.



A male Song Parrot of the Rennell race *hyacinthus* (Mark Van Beirs); only a few North Melanesian Cuckooshrikes were noted (Lars Petersson)

Crimson-rumped Myzomela ♦ (Yellow-vented M) *Myzomela eichhorni* Regular observations on the western islands.
Red-vested Myzomela ♦ (Red-bellied M) *Myzomela malaitae* NT Cracking looks at a pair in the Malaita hills. A rarity!

Black-headed Myzomela ♦ *Myzomela melanocephala* Regular in the Honiara area.
Sooty Myzomela ♦ *Myzomela tristrami* Regular sightings in the Makira lowlands.
Makira Honeyeater ♦ (San Cristobal Melidectes) *Meliarchus sclateri* Several lovely encounters. An endemic genus!
Fan-tailed Gerygone ♦ *Gerygone flavolateralis* Common and obvious on Rennell.
North Melanesian Cuckooshrike ♦ *Coracina welchmani* Excellent views of a family party on Kolombangara.
Yellow-eyed Cuckooshrike (Barred C) *Coracina lineata* Common on all the visited islands.
White-bellied Cuckooshrike *Corcina papuensis* Regular encounters in more open habitat.
Grey-capped Cicadabird *Coracina remota* Just a few observations. Unobtrusive.
Makira Cicadabird *Coracina salamonis* This recent split showed well on Makira. The female especially is distinctive.
Solomons Cuckooshrike ♦ (Black-bellied/Solomon Islands C) *Coracina holopolia* NT Splendid observations.
Long-tailed Triller ♦ *Lalage leucopyga* A handful of observations on Makira.



The Makira race (christophori) of Oriole Whistler and the rarely seen Rennell Whistler (Lars Petersson)

Oriole Whistler *Pachycephala orioloides* Recorded on most of the visited islands involving several subspecies.
Rennell Whistler *Pachycephala feminina* Good looks at this unusual bird on Rennell. The rarest Rennell endemic.
Spangled Drongo *Dicrurus bracteatus* The race *longirostris* showed several times in the Makira lowlands. See Note.
Willie-wagtail *Rhipidura leucophrys* Common throughout.
Cockerell's Fantail ♦ (White-winged F) *Rhipidura cockerelli* NT Nice looks on Ranongga and on Kolombangara.
Rennell Fantail ♦ *Rhipidura rennelliana* Regular and obvious on Rennell.
Rufous Fantail *Rhipidura rufifrons* This widespread species was seen on several islands.
Rennell Shrikebill ♦ *Clytorhynchus hamlini* Repeated mega looks of this exquisite bird on Rennell.
Solomons Monarch ♦ (Black-and-white M) *Symposiachrus barbatus* NT Very nice on Malaita and on Santa Isabel.
Kolombangara Monarch ♦ (Kulambangra M) *Symposiachrus browni* NT Regular and smart on Kolombangara.
White-collared Monarch ♦ *Symposiachrus vidua* Not uncommon in the lowland forest of Makira. Also seen on Ugi.



The inquisitive Rennell Fantail (Mark Van Beirs); The very attractive White-capped Monarch (Lars Petersson)

Island Monarch ♦ *Monarcha cinerascens* Several showed well on the islet of Fera, off Santa Isabel.

Chestnut-bellied Monarch ♦ *Monarcha castaneiventris* Regular encounters. The black morph showed well on Ugi.

White-capped Monarch ♦ *Monarcha richardsii* Fairly common in the forests of the Western Province. Attractive.

Steel-blue Flycatcher ♦ *Myiagra ferrocyanea* Regular encounters on the islands where the next two don't occur.

Makira Flycatcher ♦ (Ochre-tailed/Ochre-headed F) *Myiagra cervinicauda* NT Heard on Makira and seen on Ugi.

Melanesian Flycatcher ♦ (New Caledonian F) *Myiagra caledonica* Good looks at several in the forests of Rennell.

White-billed Crow ♦ (Guadalcanal C) *Corvus woodfordi* A few on Guadalcanal and regular on Santa Isabel.

Pacific Swallow *Hirundo tahitica* Common throughout the Solomon Islands.

Kolombangara Leaf Warbler ♦ (Kulambangra L W) *Phylloscopus amoenus* (NL) V Two seen near the volcano rim.

Australian Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus australis* (H) We heard the distinctive song at Betikama.

Bare-eyed White-eye ♦ *Woodfordia superciliosa* Fairly common and showy in the Rennell woods. Distinctive.

Yellow-throated White-eye ♦ *Zosterops metcalfei* Fairly common in the Santa Isabel forests.

Rennell White-eye ♦ *Zosterops rennellianus* Several excellent encounters on Rennell.

Vella Lavella White-eye ♦ (Banded W-e) *Zosterops vellalavella* Not very cooperative in the Vella Lavella farmbrush.



A female Melanesian Flycatcher on Rennell (Lars Petersson); a party of boisterous White-billed Crows on Santa Isabel (Mark Van Beirs)

Gizo White-eye ♦ (Splendid W-e) *Zosterops luteirostris* E Great looks at this smart species in the Gizo countryside.

Ranongga White-eye ♦ (Ganongga W-e) *Zosterops splendidus* V Good looks at this canopy species on Ranongga.

Solomons White-eye ♦ (Solomon Islands W-e) *Zosterops kulambangrae* Regular in the Kolombangara lowlands.

Kolombangara White-eye ♦ (Kulambangra W-e) *Zosterops murphyi* Several flocks noted high up on the volcano.

Malaita White-eye ♦ *Zosterops stresemanni* Small numbers were found in the Malaita hills.

Metallic Starling *Aplonis metallica* Common throughout the islands.

Singing Starling *Aplonis cantoroides* Regular in towns and villages.

Rennell Starling ♦ *Aplonis insularis* Good looks at several in the Rennell woods.

Brown-winged Starling ♦ *Aplonis grandis* Not uncommon on Guadalcanal, Malaita (*malaitae*) and Santa Isabel.

Makira Starling ♦ (San Cristobal S) *Aplonis dichroa* Small numbers were found in the Makira lowlands.

Long-tailed Myna ♦ *Mino kreffti* Quite common throughout, but not on Rennell and Makira.

Common Myna (introduced) *Acridotheres tristis* Abundant on Guadalcanal.

Island Thrush *Turdus poliocephalus* (H) We heard the distinctive call in the Rennell woods.

Midget Flowerpecker ♦ *Dicaeum aeneum* Common on Guadalcanal, Malaita and Santa Isabel.

Mottled Flowerpecker ♦ *Dicaeum tristrami* Fairly common and unusual-looking in the Makira farmbrush.

Olive-backed Sunbird *Cinnyris jugularis* Common on most islands, but absent from Rennell and Makira.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus* Regular in the Honiara airport area.



A Makira Starling at its nesthole and a lovely Rennell White-eye (Lars Petersson)



A Pacific Flying-fox on Rennell and a Solomons Flying-fox on Kolombangara (Mark Van Beirs)

MAMMALS

Brown Rat *Rattus norvegicus* A couple showed in the Kira Kira harbour.

House Rat (Black Rat) *Rattus rattus* A few were noted in Honiara.

Solomons Islands Flying-fox *Pteropus rayneri* Common in the lowlands of Kolombangara.

Rennell Flying-fox *Pteropus rennelli* One or two of these small *Pteropus* were seen on Rennell.

Pacific Flying-fox *Pteropus tonganus* Regular and active by day on Rennell.

Indo-Pacific Bottle-nosed Dolphin *Tursiops aduncus* Several excellent sightings on boat trips.

REPTILES

Monitor Lizard *Varanus indicus* We saw one of these smart creatures on Rennell.



A scenic spot on Vella Lavella where this Painted Moray Eel showed (Mark Van Beirs)



Headhunters used to be very active on Ranongga; a cracking Red Swamp Dragon (Mark Van Beirs)

NOTES TO THE SYSTEMATIC LIST

Heinroth's Shearwater *Puffinus heinrothi*

Good, but all too brief views of a single bird on one of our boat trips off Gizo (Western Province). This rarely recorded species is only known from the Solomon Islands and the seas surrounding New Britain (Bismarck Archipelago) and Bougainville (Papua New Guinea). No nest has ever been found, but it is presumed to breed in the mountains of these islands. The total population is estimated at between 350 and 1,500 birds. The species is named after Oskar Heinroth (1871–1945), German zoologist, collector in the Pacific and author.

Sanford's Sea Eagle *Haliaeetus sanfordi*

Although similar in plumage to a juvenile White-bellied Sea Eagle (and originally classified as this species), this bird of prey ranges far inland over forested mountains. It is classified as 'Vulnerable' by BirdLife/IUCN on the basis of its low population density, ongoing forest and coastal degradation, and occasional hunting. It is endemic to the Solomons Islands and the island of Bougainville (Papua New Guinea). The scientific epithet refers to Leland Cutler Sanford (1868-1950), a US zoologist.

Woodford's Rail *Nesoclopeus woodfordi*

The bird is named after Charles Woodford (1852-1927), the resident Commissioner in the Solomons Protectorate from 1896 to 1914. In "The HBW and BirdLife International Illustrated Checklist of the Birds of the World, Volume 1" the Woodford's Rail is given a new genus and is split into three: Bougainville Rail *Hypotaenidia tertia*, Santa Isabel Rail *Hypotaenidia immaculata* and Guadalcanal Rail *Hypotaenidia woodfordi*. We saw the latter two on the tour.

Roviana Rail *Gallirallus rovianae*

We managed great looks at a pair feeding in a garden on Kolombangara. This is an extremely poorly-known, flightless species which was only described in 1991. It is endemic to Kolombangara, New Georgia and adjacent islets in the Western Province and is named after the small island of Roviana.

Buff-headed Coucal *Centropus milo*

This huge cuckoo showed very well on several occasions. Its loud swearing calls lend credence to the story that invading head-hunters from Malaita were just too scared to land on Vella Lavella, home to such intimidating beasts, and paddled back home! It is endemic to the Kolombangara group (Western Province) and Guadalcanal. The scientific epithet refers to Milo, a 5th century BC giant Greek athlete.

Solomons Frogmouth *Rigidipenna inexpectata*

Exquisite views of this bizarre-looking bird near Tirotonga village on Santa Isabel. This Solomons taxon is extremely poorly-known and is endemic to the islands of Bougainville, Choiseul and Santa Isabel. It used to be considered as a subspecies of Marbled Frogmouth *Podargus ocellatus*, but recent studies found it different enough to warrant its own separate genus. If you want to know more, read the following, recently published article: Nigel Cleere, Andrew W. Kratter, David W. Steadman, Michael J. Braun, Christopher J. Huddleston, Christopher E. Filardi, Guy Dutson (2007): "A new genus of frogmouth (Podargidae) from the Solomon Islands - results from a taxonomic review of *Podargus ocellatus inexpectatus* Hartert 1901" (Ibis 149 (2), 271–286).

Collared Kingfisher *Todirhamphus chloris*

No fewer than 49 races have been described. On the tour we saw the race *alberti* (Western Province and Guadalcanal), *mala* (Malaita), *solomonis* (Makira) and *amoenus* (Rennell).

Variable Kingfisher *Ceyx lepidus*

We had fantastic looks at the race *gentianus* on Makira, saw the race *meeki* on Santa Isabel and heard the race *collectoris* on Kolombangara. This is a very variable species: have a look at plate 17 of Volume 6 of the "Handbook of the Birds of the World". "The HBW and BirdLife International Illustrated Checklist of the Birds of the World, Volume 1" splits the Variable Kingfisher into twelve separate species, of which four occur in the Solomon Islands!!!

Meek's Lorikeet *Charmosyna meeki*

These tiny lorikeets were seen several times at the camp high up on Kolombangara. This unobtrusive species is endemic to the mountainous islands of the Solomons (including Bougainville). Albert Meek (1871-1943) was an English explorer and collector in New Guinea, the Solomons and Australia. His book "A Naturalist in Cannibal Land" provides some interesting reading.

Duchess Lorikeet *Charmosyna margarethae*: Another localized Solomons montane endemic, of which we obtained very good scope views of perched birds in the lowlands of Kolombangara. An attractive but rather elusive species. The bird is named after Princess Louise Margaret Alexandra Victoria Agnes (1860-1917), Duchess of Connaught.

Black-faced Pitta *Pitta anerythra*

We heard up to five a day near the village of Tirotonga on Santa Isabel and eventually, after several days of hard trying, managed to very good views of this very little known species. Since 1938, it has only been recorded at Tirotonga, where Dave Gibbs rediscovered it in 1994 and only a handful of people have ever seen it. It is widely considered as one of the shyest and hardest to see of the 33 species of the wonderful Pitta family. It is classified as 'Vulnerable' by BirdLife/IUCN because of its rarity, and it is endemic to the islands of Bougainville, Choiseul and Santa Isabel. Definitely one of the highlights of the tour!!

Spangled Drongo *Dicrurus bracteatus*:

Several birds were seen well in the Makira lowland forests, where it is behaviourally distinct, being a quiet, unobtrusive and quite a shy bird. Its habits, calls, shape and especially long bill suggest that it might be a distinct species, but a subspecies on Guadalcanal is somewhat intermediate with the more typical drongos on New Britain, and those in turn with the very typical drongos on New Guinea.

Gizo White-eye (Splendid W-e) *Zosterops luteirostris*

This is easily the most threatened species we saw on the tour. The total population is in the range of 350-1,500 birds only and is steadily declining through habitat loss.



The group in front of Sol Air's Megapode Dash airplane; a Painted Grasshawk (Mark Van Beirs)