

Solomon Islands bird guide training and site facility reconnaissance Sept 6-17 2023

This was a trip made under the auspices of the Ministry of Tourism and Tourism Solomons, and once again put together by Marketing Officer Brenden Mautoa as a part of his development brief with the birding tourism niche market. My role was to review the post-covid tourism situation and see some of the changes to various lodges, visit some new sites and review the logistics of access, see what else could be added to bring visitors such as cultural and scenic attractions, and to run a short training programme for local guides on Malaita, developed from the very successful 2016, 2018 and 2019 initiatives.

Sept 5 Fly Cairns /Brisbane.

Sept 6 Fly Brisbane to Honiara and transfer straight over to Gizo flight, a very tight connection due to delayed departure ex-Brisbane but immigration and customs were very helpful as were Sol Air and rather to my astonishment we made it. Overnight at *Gizo Hotel*

Sept 7 Boat trips to Ranongga and then Vella Lavella, having a quick look at sites and meeting the locals on Ranongga, and giving out laminate sheets with bird pictures for the respective areas. Overnight Gizo Hotel.

Sept 8 Transfer to Kolombangara and go from Ringgi Cove to Imbu Rano Research Station at 350m. Explore the forest trail up near the landslip site that afternoon before the rain began.

Sept 9 Exploration of the trail up the mountain, going as far as Camp One Patu Kolo at 650m. The trail is quite well maintained and only moderately challenging, suitable for those with reasonable fitness. A trip up to the high-altitude cloud forest and upper montane forest is feasible either here or through Venty at Hambere who has both tents and tarpaulins and can provide porters.

Sept 10 Checking around the Imbu Rano area.

Sept 11 Transfer down to Ringgi Cove and inspection of the two guest houses there. Transfer to Hambere to see the new facilities Venty has added there, then over to Gizo then to *Fatboys Resort* via Kennedy Island.

Sept 12 *Fatboys Resort* then transfer to Nusatupe Airport for travel back to Honiara, then afternoon Malaita flight via Atoifi to Auki, all very uncertain due to us being wait-listed for the first section, but we made it. 4WD transfer up to the new *Haokaidirio Lodge* at 350m.

Sept 13 Exploration of the forests in the vicinity, and then guide training session that afternoon.

Sept 14 Practical birding below the Lodge, then a session about the use of internet resources and e-Bird at the lodge, which has very good phone reception. Left for *BH Transit Guesthouse* in Auki in heavy rain that afternoon.

Sept 15 Met with Hazel at *BH Transit Lodge* who looks to be a very good co-ordinator, and told us about the shell money workshops available, and a skull cave that would certainly be of interest.

Flight from Auki to Honiara, then several visits to the Finance & Treasury dept. and the Ministry of the Environment to get the export permits for the specimen of the undescribed rail from Malaita that we picked up that morning.

Eventual success, and many thanks to Andrew the driver from Tourism Solomons for his expertise here. The rail specimen is now bound for the Australian National Wildlife Collection in Canberra where its affinities can be evaluated, it may well be a new endemic species for the Solomons.

Sept 16 Met with local guide Samson at Mt Austen and had a look at the developments there as well as checking out how to find the Guadalcanal Rail, an important species for visitors. Some green initiatives are clearly under way such as no more single use plastic, and awareness of climate change effects, whilst habitat preservation seems to be featuring for the first time, Also saw the very respectful and appropriate Japanese Peace Park memorial which is worth including on any cultural trips here.

Sept 17 Honiara to Brisbane 1115 and then Brisbane/ Cairns, arriving home just after midnight.

I adjusted the training from the earlier formats, keeping it as clear and concise as possible and avoiding jargon and undue complexity. We covered:

- Fitness issues with clients
- Health and safety issues concerning older clients.
- Dietary issues and the need to drink plenty of water.
- Conservation issues, an area that can be expanded on in future
- The new developing markets in Asia and from photographers
- Differing needs of photographers as opposed to birders
- How to give instructions on finding birds, an area that certainly needs a lot of practice!
- Keeping a guest book and a simple record of birds seen locally,
- The use of laser pointers and direction giving
- The use of free internet resources as a database, including eBird, Internet Bird Collection and xeno-canto
- *Birding the Solomons* Powerpoint presentation
- Updated the database for local guide contact details and costs, an important element in tour planning and costing
- Practical skills in the field- know your local birds, how to find them, the use of sound recording, book resources and the use of the telescope and tripod.
- The *Birds of the Solomons Checklist* was a good resource for recording and helping to learn the birds of particular areas. I will get this revised and reprinted when I get back home.

Sound recording and sourcing calls was an area of much interest, as mobile phones have provision for storing mp3 calls, and this is an important adjunct to the finding of birds. The sessions about the use of e-Bird were also useful and demonstrated the value of reporting sightings from this little known area, as well as generating interest among the participants.

Some assistance with the provision of the *Birds of Melanesia* book, the *Birds of the Solomons Checklist* and **inexpensive binoculars** would be very well received. Phil will send details of some new inexpensive binoculars now available at around AU\$240 per pair.

How we could broaden the market:

- New tour options- look at broader based birding tours, with simpler logistics, shorter duration and cultural options as well
- The new Brisbane/Munda flight is an exciting prospect, simplifying logistics and saving internal flight costs
- Shorter combinations are of course possible, as are more rigorous extensions to Isabel, Hauta or Kolombangara summit plus an exciting new prospect on Malaita.
- Continue to explore possibility of getting up into the Guadalcanal highlands to see Moustached Kingfisher, potentially a major flagship icon-bird for serious dedicated birder tours.
- **Self-guided tours** without an overseas guide are certainly now feasible as most of the major areas now have trained local bird guides. This needs to be advertised as well, and would save a significant cost element
- **Costs in the Solomons are quite high and we need to look at ways to help make them more manageable-** shorter duration tours with simpler logistics are one, having the information about how much boats cost is also invaluable, and less expensive hotel choices in both Honiara and Gizo.
- I think we can make some significant savings by implementing the above and help make the tours both more attractive and more competitive.
- **Extending and offering the guide training program in other provinces** is worth following up, I should be available to help in 2024 if courses can be offered in Makira and Vella Lavella for example, whilst Venty at Hambere has a potentially very useful small conference centre developed.

Bird sites

- The new Haekiodirio Lodge at 350m on Malaita opens up access to the special birds of the island for the first time, and it would be a useful addition to a general birding itinerary. The new Auki ferry also makes access much less problematic, a very positive new development.
- Mt Austen is a good destination that is readily accessible and gives 12+ endemic birds for a morning there, with Samson a very good local guide. Sadly increasing settlement there means more disturbance and fewer birds though some new initiatives to preserve the habitat look to be developing and a green awareness program is evident.
- Update websites with current information and tour options
- Publicity work is to upload bird sound recordings and photos to the various websites, which raises the profile of the Solomons and generates interest.
- Magazine articles on Birding Kolombangara and Malaita can include cultural elements, and the Solomon Airlines magazine may be one suitable publication to try as well as BirdLife Australia.
- Facebook and eBird will also be used for publicity for the Solomons derived from this trip.

My thanks to the many people who helped me throughout the tour, we were once again met with great interest and friendly people everywhere and it certainly gave me further valuable insights into organizing bird tours here, which I hope will be useful in the steadily developing Solomons birding tourism program. My thanks to them all for their contributions.

Participants in the training:

Stephen Misaisio and his staff and relatives at Haediokirio Lodge, Malaita

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