



Field Guides Tour Report

Papua New Guinea 2019: New Britain

Jul 20, 2019 to Jul 25, 2019

Jay VanderGaast

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Blue-eyed Cockatoo is one of the endemics of New Britain, and was one of the easier ones to find, although we had to wait until the last day. We ended up with great views, though! Photo by guide Jay VanderGaast.

While New Britain is simply a province of Papua New Guinea, it differs considerably from the parts of PNG that we visited. The laid-back island vibe gives New Britain more in common with any number of Caribbean islands than it does with the highlands of PNG, and it really makes for a nice, relaxing finale to our time in the region. And Walindi Dive Resort is a wonderful base of operations from which to search for the numerous specialties found here.

While our bird list for the island isn't especially long, more than half of the species we tallied here were new to our PNG lists, with about a third of them qualifying (in my view at least) as specialty species. Not a bad haul, really, for just 4 days of birding.

Endemics, whether they were island endemics or regional endemics, are obviously a big draw here, and we scored a good number of these. One of the big highlights was the rare, and still poorly-known Golden Masked-Owl, of which we found 4 different birds in the space of 15 minutes among the oil palms! The New Britain Boobook was not quite as exciting, given that we viewed it for all of 10 seconds before the deluge hit and the bird vanished behind a sheet of water. Pigeons were well-represented here, with nice views of the gorgeous Finsch's Imperial-Pigeon, as well as Yellowish Imperial-Pigeon, which has just been elevated to a good species. Kingfishers also made a good showing, with 7 species seen, 5 of which fall into one of the endemic categories, including the lovely blue, turquoise, and white New Britain Kingfishers, and the striking Black-capped Paradise-Kingfisher, another form which has just been elevated to a full species. Pied Coucal, Blue-eyed Cockatoo, Sclater's Myzomela were among the other standout specialties. And I've got to mention a couple of other species, that while not endemics, are real key birds to see here, namely Black Bittern, which is easier here than anywhere else I know of, and the odd Nicobar Pigeon, which is also generally quite easy here.

It was a fun four days here on New Britain, and I'm glad you all chose to do this extension, or I wouldn't have gotten back here myself. Thanks a lot for joining me, and thanks to our guides Joseph and David, and all the excellent staff at Walindi for taking such good care of us.

--Jay

KEYS FOR THIS LIST

One of the following keys may be shown in brackets for individual species as appropriate: * = heard only, I = introduced, E = endemic, N = nesting, a = austral migrant, b = boreal migrant

BIRDS

Anatidae (Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl).

PACIFIC BLACK DUCK (*Anas superciliosa*) – Commonly seen in ditches and puddles in among the oil palm plantations.

Megapodiidae (Megapodes).

MELANESIAN SCRUBFOWL (*Megapodius eremita*) – The wet weather at Garu Wildlife Management Area (WMA) made this one tougher than usual, but David went inside the forest and flushed up a bird that flew right past us at eye level for an excellent view. Peter also joined Joseph for a walk further into the forest, where they had several more birds.

Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies).

BLUE-BREASTED QUAIL (*Synoicus chinensis lepidus*) – Generally a tough bird to see well, and the dry weather at Numundo likely kept these (and the rails) from feeding on the road as they have on past trips. Still, we had reasonable views of a pair that flew across the road ahead of us.

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves).

MACKINLAY'S CUCKOO-DOVE (*Macropygia mackinlayi*) – A small-island specialist, and one of several targets during our Kimbe Bay boat trip. We ended up with great looks at a couple of pairs, one each on Malumalu and Restorf islands. I'd only seen these on Malumalu previously, so it was good to see them on Restorf as well.

STEPHAN'S DOVE (*Chalcophaps stephani*) – A much easier bird to see here than in mainland PNG. We had small numbers on several days as we passed through the oil palm plantations, especially around the large containers used to hold the palm fruits, as several doves were often around these containers feeding on spillage.

NICOBAR PIGEON (*Caloenas nicobarica*) – Parts of the palm plantation near the Kulu River were actively being felled, perhaps contributing to fewer of these large, odd pigeons feeding there. As a result, we had to work a bit harder for these birds, but ultimately managed some scope views of a nervous looking trio in a dense vine tangle.

NOB-BILLED FRUIT-DOVE (*Ptilinopus insolitus*) – A distant pair at Garu WMA showed reasonably well, but were somewhat surprisingly the only ones we encountered this year. [E]

RED-KNOBBED IMPERIAL-PIGEON (PINK-NECKED) (*Ducula rubricera rubricera*) – The most commonly seen imperial-pigeon, with small numbers encountered on most of our outings.

FINSCH'S IMPERIAL-PIGEON (*Ducula finschii*) – A couple of calling birds at Garu just wouldn't show, but we tracked down another along the Kulu River, and those that were in front got fantastic scope views of this scarce bird before it sadly flushed, not to be seen again. [E]

ISLAND IMPERIAL-PIGEON (*Ducula pistrinaria vanwyckii*) – In big numbers on the satellite islands in Kimbe Bay, where their "boo-hoo-hoo" calls are a constant backdrop while on or near these islands. [N]

TORRESIAN IMPERIAL-PIGEON (YELLOWISH) (*Ducula spilorrhoa subflavescens*) – This form was just elevated to full species status in the latest taxonomic updates, and I think it's a good call. The yellow plumage definitely sets these apart from the shimmering white of true Torresian IP. We had some good scope views of these on the wooded ridge near the manager's house at Haella. [E]

Cuculidae (Cuckoos).

PIED COUCAL (*Centropus ateralbus*) – The easier to see of the two endemic coucals, especially at Garu, where a number of these were drying out on exposed perches after the soaking from the torrential rains that accompanied us on our drive to the reserve. [E]

VIOLACEOUS COUCAL (*Centropus violaceus*) – Heard more than seen, but we did manage some pretty good views of this large coucal in a dense vine tangle along the Kulu River. [E]

PACIFIC KOEL (ORIENTAL) (*Eudynamis orientalis salvadorii*) – A male made a couple of passes over the road at Garu WMA.

CHANNEL-BILLED CUCKOO (*Scythrops novaehollandiae schoddei*) – A trio of these massive cuckoos were seen by the folks on the road while David, Peter, and I were inside the forest in pursuit of a small feeding flock at Garu WMA.

BRUSH CUCKOO (BRUSH) (*Cacomantis variolosus macrocercus*) – Heard several times, but again, our only view was at Garu, where we had scope looks at a perched bird.

Apodidae (Swifts).

WHITE-RUMPED SWIFTLET (*Aerodramus spodiopygius noonaedanae*) – Small numbers were mixed in with the more numerous Uniform Swiftlets both at Garu and Numundo.

UNIFORM SWIFTLET (*Aerodramus vanikorensis pallens*) – The more common of the two swiftlets, with good numbers at several sites.

Hemiprocnidae (Treeswifts).

MOUSTACHED TREESWIFT (*Hemiproctne mystacea aeroplanes*) – The heavy rains as we drove to Garu WMA must have kept these birds from flying around, as we found a half a dozen of them, along with numerous Melanesian Kingfishers, perched on some power lines along the way.

Rallidae (Rails, Gallinules, and Coots).

BUFF-BANDED RAIL (*Gallirallus philippensis meyeri*) – Views of this bird were varied, as some of the van windows were too rain and mud-splattered to allow folks to get any kind of view out of them. Luckily, we picked these up on our last afternoon back on the PNG mainland, or some probably wouldn't have counted them.

WHITE-BROWED CRAKE (*Amaurornis cinerea*) – Peter ventured closer to the treeswifts while the rest of us dashed back to the vans to avoid getting soaked by the heavy rain, and he wound up getting photos of one perched on a log over the ditch. Elsewhere we only heard these, but again we caught up back on PNG on our final afternoon.

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers).

BLACK NODDY (*Anous minutus*) – I estimated 300+ of these lovely terns out in Kimbe Bay, where we had plenty of nice close looks at several feeding frenzies we approached. Try as we might, we couldn't turn any of them into Brown Noddies.

BLACK-NAPED TERN (*Sterna sumatrana*) – A few out in Kimbe Bay, with especially nice looks at one that made a close pass at eye level as we were floating offshore of Little Malumalu Island.

COMMON TERN (*Sterna hirundo*) – At least a couple of the smaller, white terns we saw were identified as this species.

GREAT CRESTED TERN (*Thalasseus bergii*) – Small numbers on the boat trip. It's an easy identification when you can make out the orange-yellow bill.

Fregatidae (Frigatebirds)

LESSER FRIGATEBIRD (*Fregata ariel*) – We counted 8 frigatebirds high overhead at Malumalu Island, and despite the poor lighting, Peter got good enough photos to support the identification of at least some of them as this species.

Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants and Shags)

LITTLE PIED CORMORANT (*Microcarbo melanoleucos*) – A lone bird was swimming in one of the drainage ditches in the oil palm plantations.

Ardeidae (Herons, Egrets, and Bitterns)

BLACK BITTERN (*Ixobrychus flavicollis*) – If there's any easier place to see this usually difficult species, I haven't been there yet. We tallied good views of about a half a dozen of these around various wet areas in the plantations.

GREAT EGRET (*Ardea alba*) – Just a few birds scattered around various wet areas. One flock of white egrets at dusk at Numundo was called out as Cattle Egret by our local guides, but was actually either this species or Intermediate Egret, though the poor light made it difficult to be sure.

RUFOUS NIGHT-HERON (*Nycticorax caledonicus*) – Mainly seen at night, flushing up from the roadside in the plantations, but we also found a nest in what seemed like a rather odd place--a tall emergent tree on the ridge-line at Haella. This nest contained at least one large chick. [N]

Pandionidae (Osprey)

OSPREY (AUSTRALASIAN) (*Pandion haliaetus cristatus*) – A couple were seen flying over the satellite islands during our Kimbe Bay boat trip.

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

PACIFIC BAZA (*Aviceda subcristata bismarckii*) – A lone bird showed well at Garu. A lovely bird, though it initially raised our hopes that we had spotted the much rarer Black Honey-Buzzard.

VARIABLE GOSHAWK (VARIABLE) (*Accipiter hiogaster dampieri*) – Quite common, and seen regularly in small numbers, including right above the bar at Walindi.

BRAHMINY KITE (*Haliastur indus*) – Numerous, and seen daily.

WHITE-BELLIED SEA-EAGLE (*Haliaeetus leucogaster*) – A juvenile flew over at Garu, and we had several nice adults out on the satellite islands in Kimbe Bay.

Tytonidae (Barn-Owls)

GOLDEN MASKED-OWL (*Tyto aurantia*) – A poorly-known bird with only a handful of sightings before about 5-6 years ago, when they first were noticed hunting inside the oil palm plantations near Walindi Lodge. It is still not very well known, though we nearly expect to see them nowadays, as the local guides have really learned a lot about them over the past few years. We certainly couldn't have had a much easier time with them this year, as we found our first shortly after arriving in the most reliable are for them, then in the course of about 15 minutes, we found three other birds, with a couple of them giving us incredibly good views before they moved off to continue hunting! [E]

Strigidae (Owls)

NEW BRITAIN BOOBOOK (*Ninox odiosa*) – Immediately on hearing that the "boobook man" had located his regularly roosting owls, we set off from the lodge, and headed up the ridge, setting quite a brisk pace, as the weather was closing in on us. We had just barely made it to the viewing spot when the rain began, and we had just enough time for a quick look through the scope before the skies opened up and our chance to see the bird was over. Torrential rains accompanied us all the way back down the trail, as did a gang of local kids, who were having great fun splashing in the pools and stream that the trail had become. [E]

Bucerotidae (Hornbills)

BLYTH'S HORNBILL (*Rhyticeros plicatus dampieri*) – This form is endemic to the Bismarck Archipelago, and was quite common where decent forest remains, such as at Garu and along the Kulu River.

Alcedinidae (Kingfishers)

COMMON KINGFISHER (COBALT-EARED) (*Alcedo atthis hispidoides*) – The "kingfisher" of the UK; this race is just about as far from the British Isles as one could imagine, though there is one other race occurring to the SE in the Solomon Islands. These birds were regularly seen along the ditches running through the palm plantations, and we had numerous good views.

NEW BRITAIN DWARF-KINGFISHER (*Ceyx sacerdotis*) – Some fantastic spotting by local guide David got us on to one of these tiny endemic kingfishers, just before it got too nervous and blasted off into the forest. [E]

NEW BRITAIN KINGFISHER (*Todiramphus albonotatus*) – Aka White-mantled Kingfisher. These gorgeous birds were a nice find at Garu, and we enjoyed good scope studies of a pair perched high in a roadside tree. [E]

SACRED KINGFISHER (*Todiramphus sanctus*) – A winter visitor from Australia, and we saw just one, perched low over the water on Malumalu Island. In the field guides this bird appears extremely similar to the local variety of Melanesian Kingfisher, but with one of that species also perched nearby, we were able to see that they are really much more distinct than we had expected.

BEACH KINGFISHER (BEACH) (*Todiramphus saurophagus saurophagus*) – Mainly found on the small satellite islands, and our only one was on Little Malumalu, where we had an excellent look at it from the boat.

MELANESIAN KINGFISHER (NEW BRITAIN) (*Todiramphus tristrami tristrami*) – Fairly recently split off (along with several other species) from Collared Kingfisher. This is the commonly seen kingfisher on the island, likely to be seen anywhere, including on roadside wires.

BUFF-BREASTED PARADISE-KINGFISHER (BLACK-CAPPED) (*Tanysiptera sylvia nigriceps*) – Another bonus from the most recent taxonomic update, as this is another form that was just elevated to a good species on its own. This bird can be quite tricky, but it came pretty easy this trip, and we had nice looks at a couple of birds, one each at Garu and the Kulu River, thanks to some good spotting by our local guides. [E]

Meropidae (Bee-eaters)

RAINBOW BEE-EATER (*Merops ornatus*) – A single bird perched on Malumalu Island was a bit of a surprise out there.

Coraciidae (Rollers).

DOLLARBIRD (*Eurystomus orientalis crassirostris*) – This subspecies is endemic to the Bismarck Archipelago, and we saw just one at Garu.

Cacatuidae (Cockatoos).

BLUE-EYED COCKATOO (*Cacatua ophthalmica*) – Usually one of the easier endemics to see, but we cut it pretty close, and still needed to find this bird by our last full day on the island. But we did really well with them on that day, getting nice views of a perched bird along the Kulu River in the morning, then seeing several more at close range in a fruiting tree near the manager's house at Haella. [E]

Psittaculidae (Old World Parrots).

ECLECTUS PARROT (*Eclectus roratus solomonensis*) – Abundant and easy to see on New Britain, and we had loads of good looks. We even had them on the lodge grounds, and I expect it was one of these birds that massacred all those star fruits along the walkway one day.

RED-FLANKED LORIKEET (*Charmosyna placentis pallidior*) – A small group of these were foraging in a good flowering tree over the road at Garu, raising my hopes that the much rarer Red-chinned Lorikeet would also show up, but it certainly didn't happen while we were watching.

PURPLE-BELLIED LORY (*Lorius hypoinochrous devittatus*) – Similar to Black-capped Lory of mainland PNG, but with some small plumage differences and very different calls. These were pretty common wherever there was reasonable forest.

RAINBOW LORIKEET (COCONUT) (*Trichoglossus haematodus massena*) – As noted in the tour report for the main PNG tour, this form was just split off as a good species on its own. In fact Rainbow Lorikeet was split into 6 different species, including two in Australia, and three on various Indonesian islands. Our records were limited to a few flyover flocks at Garu.

Pittidae (Pittas).

NEW BRITAIN PITTA (*Erythropitta gazellae*) – Close but no cigar, as we heard a couple along the Kulu River but they just wouldn't come out to where they could be seen. [E*]

Meliphagidae (Honeyeaters).

ASHY MYZOMELA (*Myzomela cineracea*) – We were just getting dropped off at our rooms after a morning outing when David exited the van and immediately noticed one of these perched just over the parking area, where it obligingly sat until everyone could scramble out from the back. Our only others were a couple more that same afternoon at Haella. [E]

SCLATER'S MYZOMELA (*Myzomela sclateri*) – This small island specialist was present in good numbers on both Malumalu and Restorf (where I don't think I've seen them before) and we had several excellent looks including a few stunning males, on both islands. [E]

NEW BRITAIN FRIARBIRD (*Philemon cockerelli cockerelli*) – One of our first endemics, with several hanging out in the casuarinas above the bar shortly after our arrival at Walindi. Also seen regularly in other areas of decent forest. [E]

Campephagidae (Cuckooshrikes).

WHITE-BELLIED CUCKOOSHRIKE (*Coracina papuensis sclaterii*) – We had just one sighting of this endemic race on our final afternoon at Haella.

VARIED TRILLER (*Lalage leucomela falsa*) – Like the cuckooshrike, these were also seen only on our final afternoon at Haella, and are also represented here by an endemic subspecies, though in the case of the trillers, we had a pair.

Pachycephalidae (Whistlers and Allies).

BLACK-TAILED WHISTLER (*Pachycephala melanura dahli*) – Sometimes known as Mangrove Golden Whistler, a pair of these handsome birds showed exceptionally well on Malumalu Island.

Rhipiduridae (Fantails).

NORTHERN FANTAIL (MELANESIAN) (*Rhipidura rufiventris finschii*) – Another widespread species represented here by an endemic subspecies. And again, we had a pair of these on our last afternoon at Haella, where they gave good looks despite being chased around by a couple of Willie-wagtails.

WILLIE-WAGTAIL (*Rhipidura leucophrys melaleuca*) – Abundant throughout, and seen daily, including some nesting birds on the sticks that Joseph stuck in the mud as kingfisher perches right out in front of the bar. [N]

Monarchidae (Monarch Flycatchers).

ISLAND MONARCH (*Monarcha cinerascens perpallidus*) – We were told by another group that they were unable to find this small island specialist on either Malumalu or Restorf and had had to cruise out across the bay to a distant island to track one down. So I was quite relieved when I spotted one in the foliage on Malumalu. It wasn't the most cooperative bird out there, but I think everyone managed reasonable views.

SHINING FLYCATCHER (*Myiagra alecto chalybeocephala*) – Nice views of this one out on the satellite islands, and some of you may have also seen one on the grounds of Walindi Lodge.

DULL FLYCATCHER (VELVET) (*Myiagra hebetior eichhorni*) – Heard at both Garu (and along the Kulu River, though we never really got close to one. [E*])

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies).

BISMARCK CROW (*Corvus insularis*) – Numerous, especially along the roads in the early morning, as groups gorged themselves on the abundant flattened frogs and toads that had been run over in the night. [E]

Hirundinidae (Swallows).

PACIFIC SWALLOW (*Hirundo tahitica ambiens*) – Represented here by this endemic race, a fairly common bird which we saw a few times.

Acrocephalidae (Reed Warblers and Allies).

AUSTRALIAN REED WARBLER (*Acrocephalus australis sumbae*) – Pretty good views of a couple of these singing in the tall rank grass along the entrance road to Numundo Cattle Farm.

Locustellidae (Grassbirds and Allies).

TAWNY GRASSBIRD (PAPUAN) (*Megalurus timoriensis interscapularis*) – Also in the rank fields at Numundo, and we managed to get a scope view of one after seeing several perform song flights before disappearing into the grass. As noted on the PNG trip list, the birds in PNG have just been split off as Papuan Grassbird.

Sturnidae (Starlings).

METALLIC STARLING (METALLIC) (*Aplonis metallica nitida*) – Quite numerous in all the forested sites we visited, including on the satellite islands, where a nesting colony was in one of the tallest trees on Malumalu. [N]

LONG-TAILED MYNA (*Mino kreffti*) – Very similar to PNG mainland's Yellow-faced Myna, but apparently not that species closest relative. These were quite common in good forest areas such as Garu and the riparian habitat along the Kulu River.

Dicaeidae (Flowerpeckers).

RED-BANDED FLOWERPECKER (*Dicaeum eximium layardorum*) – Oddly scarce this trip, and we had just a single bird each at Gary and Haella. [E]

Nectariniidae (Sunbirds and Spiderhunters).

BLACK SUNBIRD (*Leptocoma sericea caeruleogula*) – Quite common and widespread, including on the lodge grounds. This race is endemic to New Britain and a couple of other small islands nearby.

Passeridae (Old World Sparrows).

EURASIAN TREE SPARROW (*Passer montanus*) – Single birds were seen on a couple of days. A recent arrival to the island, and it hasn't yet exploded like it has on mainland PNG. [I]

Estrildidae (Waxbills and Allies).

BISMARCK MUNIA (*Lonchura melaena melaena*) – Good numbers of these handsome munias were present in the wet grasslands at Numundo Cattle Farm. [E]

MAMMALS

GREATER FLYING FOX (*Pteropus neohibernicus*) – A single bat flew over the road in the early morning at Garu.

INDO-PACIFIC BOTTLENOSE DOLPHIN (*Tursiops aduncus*) – A half dozen or so of these were spotted en route to Restorf Island, and while we had okay looks at them from close range, they never engaged with the boat, as dolphins sometimes do.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Totals for the tour: 74 bird taxa and 2 mammal taxa