

**New Caledonia, 2-10 July 2017**  
**Ian Reid**



*It is wise to persuade people to do things and make them think it was their own idea.* Nelson Mandela

### **Introduction**

A trip to New Caledonia is on the bucket list of any world lister, especially family listers, because of one special bird – Kagu, *Rhynochetos jubatus* – that lives in its own taxonomic family. I first heard of this bird somewhat late in my birding existence, through the most-famous-ever thread on birdforum, “Bristol to Kagu” which I discovered when we encountered the author, Larry Wheatland (now Sweetland) on a trail on Mt Makiling in 2010. Larry and his girlfriend sold up in the UK and travelled by land and sea (eschewing air travel whenever possible) across Europe, Asia and Australasia with final destination New Caledonia. They kept a running blog/report of their travels on the thread which lasted for nearly 5 years, more than 1000 posts and c. 1800 bird species.

When we moved to Australia a few years ago I imagined that at some point I too, would try to make the trip to the French Polynesian islands that are a mere 2.5 hours’ flight from the Australian mainland. I dropped a few hints that it might be a good family holiday destination, but not often and not with much force. So it came as a very welcome surprise that somewhat independently of me, Nikki and the girls had decided that a winter sun holiday was in order, and that a trip to New Caledonia would satisfy their beach desires and also give the girls, especially Erica, a chance to practice their French. I hid my excitement at “their” choice well, and negotiated one dedicated birding day, making sure this was early in the week in case I needed to steal another later as backup.

It is winter in New Caledonia in July, but it is north of the tropic of Capricorn and so the drier season with typical average maximum temperatures around 22-23 degC. The day we arrived it had rained, but the rest of the week it was true to that balmy average, sunny and all but one day beautifully still (kite0srfers were out in force the day it was a bit windier). We spent most of the week in shorts and t-shirts, even deep into the evenings, and there was no need for wet-suits in the water with the sea, like the air, around 23 deg. I had been concerned that birds would not be calling or responsive because of the season, and though this was true to an extent, it did not cause me miss anything.

We were fortunate that Qantas had a special deal on flight prices for the time we wanted to go (c. \$780 per person), and decided that we would spend all of our time on Grand Terre. We did look into travelling to Isles de Pins or Lifou, and also at a few days north of Noumea. However the ferry schedule didn't work for us, the additional costs flights to either island (another \$400 each on top) killed that plan. North of Noumea a highly recommended hotel near Bourail (and hence near Poe Beach and Parc des Grands Fougères) had no availability for a family room the dates we needed. This meant that we stayed most of the time in Noumea (5 nights) with an extravagance of 2 nights in an islet resort a short ferry-ride from Noumea to finish the holiday off. From a birding perspective I was content with this since Grand Terre holds the majority of the endemics, and the key sites on Grand Terre are all relatively easily accessible from Noumea. The Lifou White-eyes (Small and Large) as well as the Ouvéa Parakeet (split from Horned) would have to wait, along with a few small island specialists much more easily seen on Lifou or other islands than on Grand Terre.

NC has 21 endemics, not including the NC Rail and NC Owlet-nightjar which are probably extinct. My targets would nominally be the 18 on Grand Terre, plus any of the 9-10 additional restricted range birds from French Polynesia and environs. I also decided that the NC Thicketbird (Grassbird) was not worth me chasing. If I were to have tried it would have been at the site reported by Tommy Pederson ([https://www.cloudbirders.com/tripreport/repository/PEDERSEN\\_NewCaledonia\\_08\\_2015.pdf](https://www.cloudbirders.com/tripreport/repository/PEDERSEN_NewCaledonia_08_2015.pdf)), but in the context of a family holiday I could not justify squeezing in the special trip required with low probability of success but high probability of ill-feeling from the rest of the crew.

The most famous site in New Caledonia is the Parc Provincial de la Rivière Bleue. It holds most of the endemics, is the most reliable site for Kagu, and the only realistic possibility for Crow Honeyeater. This exceedingly rare, large, black honeyeater, with an odd pink wattle on its face was my second-top target. It is critically endangered with apparently fewer than 250 birds left.

Prior to travelling I investigated the possibility of guided birding. Many trip reports mentioned Jean-Marc Meriot, a park ranger at Rivière Bleue who knows the birds well, and in the past he has guided birders around for a fee payable to the Parc. However when I contacted him he referred me to a new professional service, Caledonian Birds run by Isabelle Jollit. Isabelle's quote

for a morning's birding was more than I was prepared to pay; I declined and decided I'd take the risk of finding (or not) the birds myself.

As expected, I did not end up looking for the Thicketbird, but got all of the other endemics on Grand Terre without too much difficulty, using a dedicated full day of birding plus a 2 hour stint one morning, along with a keeping my eyes/ears open when doing family stuff. Of the gettable birds I missed Metallic Pigeon which only now I am back in Australia rankles a bit (having missed this in PNG and Philippines as well). However as well as seeing almost all of the birds including my top targets, we had a superb holiday, with amazing weather throughout and swimming with turtles a real highlight.

### Getting to know Noumea

Sun 2<sup>nd</sup> – Tues 4<sup>th</sup> July

We arrived to NC via Brisbane, late on the evening of 2<sup>nd</sup> July. The international airport, Tontouta, is about 45min north of Noumea so by the time we had picked up our small hire car (Point Rouge), squeezed ourselves and our luggage into it, and travelled the 50km south, it was the wee hours of Monday morning before we were settled into our comfortable hotel in the south of Noumea. We had no difficulty finding the hotel – or any other spots, including the birding sites – because I had the foresight to download the maps of the relevant areas to my phone prior to travel. Map download is a relatively new service offering in the Google Maps app, and it made navigating without internet/4G a breeze.

Monday morning I bagged my first few ticks from the hotel window: a small flock of **Green-backed White-eye** were actively feeding in the tree outside the room, and a **Coconut Lorikeet** screeched conspicuously like a Rainbow (from which it has been split). Once the rest of the family was awake we drove the 2km into the centre ville and spent a couple of hours



exploring Noumea. Though the truth is, this didn't take very long. I refused to believe the reports that dissed the town; surely there would be a charming old town with a nice café or bar, or some interesting markets, or some engaging historical or cultural attractions. Sadly, we found the reports to be mostly true. There was no charming old town that we could find. The harbour was pretty, as harbours usually are, but the rest of the town looked tired and unloved. Graffiti covers bits of most buildings and even road signs. We tried the museum, to get a sense of local history, but it was closed. We looked for interesting shops, but found only shoe shops. Our search for a pleasant café or bar to take lunch and people-watch was fruitless. In the end we retreated to Anse Vata where our hotel was situated, had lunch in an excellent (though expensive) steak restaurant, strolled along the beach and snoozed at the hotel.

I had originally lined up Tuesday as my birding day at the Parc Provincial de la Riviere Bleue. Instead, on a spur of the moment decision and overly influenced by the reduced price on offer for Tuesday, we booked a trip to Ilot Amedee, a coral atoll about 45min south of Noumea. Here we lazed on the beach, enjoyed an excellent buffet lunch with Polynesian dancing (not my cup of tea but the girls loved it), took a glass-bottomed boat trip around the reef, paddle-boarded and snorkeled and swam with turtles in crystal waters. The island is also home to a large population of Striped Sea Snakes (*Tricot Rayes* in French, and technically sea kraits, not sea snakes). These shy and highly venomous reptiles are amphibious, spending much of their time in the water but coming ashore to rest and lay eggs. We found a number under the boardwalk outside the café, and one even caused quite a stir when it dropped from a tree and landed in some Australian lady's hat. Nikki and Lou had one swim under their paddle board at one point, the only one seen in the water. Although venomous, they are very shy, and their fangs are small and at the back of their mouths (unlike the terrestrial snakes of Australia from which these guys are descended) so they pose little danger to humans – you would almost have to stick your fingers into the snake's mouth to be injected with poison.

Birding-wise it was not a day to write much about. I kept my eyes peeled on the trip over for pelagic birds but saw a few **Silver Gulls** and a single **Greater-crested Tern**. A nectar station next to the restaurant had a constant stream of characterful **Grey-eared Honeyeaters** visiting (my first good looks at this near-endemic), and a few very tame **Buff-banded Rails** wandered about the lawns. A White-eye that I uncritically and stupidly initially noted as Green-backed was, on reflection, a **Silvereye**, identified by its decidedly not-green, but grey back.



## Parc Provincial de la Riviere Bleue

Wednesday 5<sup>th</sup> July

Wednesday morning I set out from Noumea at 5.15am and followed the GPS navigation on my phone to the Parc Provincial de la Riviere Bleue without drama to the parc entrance. Once beyond Magenta Airport there is really only one turn to make, following signs to Yate, before the turnoff to the parc itself. It was just getting light when I arrived. The parc does not open until 7am, but Jean-Marc had said there were a number of endemics around the parc entrance so I had travelled early for some on foot birding while I waited for it to open.

I was forced to park outside the gate but walked in and around the payment station and park office. First new bird of the day was a poor view of a **Horned Parakeet** atop a pine near the park office. I would hear these regularly during the day and see a couple in flight but never get better views or a chance of a decent photo. A bit more walking and poking about and I had seen a few more **Green-backed White-eye** and a **New Caledonia Myzomela** (lovely red, white and black bird, very similar to Scarlet Honeyeater in eastern Australia). A **Grey Fantail** (no streaks on this bird) was the only other bird before I made

my way back to the car in time for the park to open.



At 7am a few staff arrived and opened the gate. I paid the 400F entrance fee and the 400F bus ticket I would need to get deeper into the park. Apparently it was once possible to drive one's own car in to the humid forest – prime Kagu habitat – but more recently it

is only park staff (and licensed operators like Isabelle) that can drive in, along with a shuttle-bus service that runs about once an hour during the day. The alternative is to walk or hire a bike. I chose to take the bus as far as the Grand Kaori, a superb 1000 y.o. tree that only remains because, unlike all of the others that once stood here, it was too big to fell. The Grand Kaori is also supposedly a good site for Kagu

Once I had my tickets I drove the 6-7km to Pont Perignon where the first navette (shuttle) would depart at 7.30. I made it in the nick of time after a couple of stops to pick up **Barred Honeyeater** and **White-bellied Goshawk**. **White-faced Heron** and **Little Pied Cormorant** at the bridge were a reminder that I was not that far from Australia.

It is about 6km from the Pont Perignon to the point where the humid forest starts, and a further 2km to the Grand Kaori, where I alighted alone (leaving the only other 2 passengers to carry on with the shuttle) and I spent the next 5-6 hours on foot.



I began by walking the boardwalk and trail past the Grand Kaori and through the forest. Immediately I picked up **Streaked Fantail**, a lot like Grey in appearance and conspicuous behaviour, but with a streaked breast. A few Horned Parakeets could be heard calling above but I couldn't see them. A rasping alarm attracted my attention and I found a **Southern Shrikebill**,

an oddly shaped bird with a long powerful bill and long cocked tail. Halfway around the trail reaches a viewpoint over the water and I hear I heard a rustle in the undergrowth. Then a drawn out hiss. I turned to see a shape move and morph into a large pale grey bird – a **Kagu**! You bloody beauty! I soon realized there were two birds, one following the other. The light was very poor and my attempts at photography futile until they circled right round and decided to cross the track right in front of me. Half an hour into my first proper birding of the trip and I had scored with the top target – an auspicious start! I bounded along the track back to the bus stop happily. Sweet **Yellow-bellied Flyrobin** behaved just like their close cousins in Australia, Eastern Yellow Robins, following me around, popping up on sticks and tree trunks to check out the big bumbling intruder.



My next main target was Crow Honeyeater. Jean-Marc had emailed me a week or two beforehand saying he had most recently seen one at a spot called Gue de la Pourina, which is about a km further along from the Grand Kaori. I decided to walk this stretch of road, birding as I went. Playback seemed to be Jean-Marc's main tactic, judging by the trip reports I had read, so I too played the call, though not often. I started at the Grand Kaori bus stop, as much to familiarize myself with the call as anything, and then tried again about 100m and 200m along the road. Barely 200m from the Grand Kaori I heard a rustle in the tree above the road, and looked up to see a largish back shape almost directly overhead. I only had an arse-end view as it shook itself down, but as it turned I could see the pink wattle on its face – a **Crow Honeyeater** – target #2 in the bag already by 8.45am. As I moved to try and get a better view I heard the sound of a vehicle approaching. Just my luck that the one car that would come along in the next hour should arrive right at the moment I have just found one of the world's rarest birds. Before I could manoeuvre to a better spot the vehicle trundled past and the honeyeater flushed deep into the forest not to be seen again.

I carried on to Gue de la Pourina. Along the way I found my first **New Caledonian Whistler**, a split from Golden but looking distinct with a deeper tinge to the gold colour, including an orange glow to the upper breast. I also heard a few **Goliath Imperial Pigeons**. Once at Gue de la Pourina



(around 9.20) I finally managed to pin down a view of one and also found my first **New Caledonian Friarbird**. A sweet warbling got me thinking Gerygone, and sure enough I soon pinned down a small group of **Fantailed Gerygone**.



A trail leads off up into the forest here and I initially decided to follow it – scoring brief views of another **Kagu** before it vanished into the forest – but then changed my mind in favour of walking the road to Pont Germain.

Another vehicle approached and I realized it was Isabelle with some paying punters. We introduced ourselves (she said she was expecting to see me at some point during the week) and I asked about Cloven-feathered Dove, next-most-desirable target on my list. Her advice was to try back at the Grand Kaori, though I was mindful that a number of reports struggled with *Pigeon Verte* in Riviere Bleue and picked it up elsewhere. I would head back to the Grand Kaori later, but it was still only 10am so I carried on towards the Pont.

Along the way I found a female **New Caledonian Flycatcher** (red throated) and later a pair including a male (which has a deep blue/grey throat), as well as a pair of **New Caledonia Cuckooshrikes**. I also heard and had flight views of more **Horned Parakeets** but they refused to pose for pictures. The endemics were falling thick and fast, though I had not heard anything that sounded like it might be Cloven-feathered Dove.

A 100m short of the bridge I decided to wander back and a few moments later Isabelle pulled up again (punterless now) and offered a lift back to the Grand Kaori. I thought briefly but declined: “I will see and hear more on foot”, I



ventured. She agreed. I saw no new birds on the walk back but my prediction was right – within 5min of seeing Isabelle I had come across another **Kagu** right on the roadside. This bird was less nervous than the previous 3 and despite my presence and constantly clicking shutter, kept on tossing leaves looking for grubs and the like, apparently unperturbed.



200m short of the Grand Kaori, where I'd had the Crow Honeyeater I tried more playback but this time there was no sign. Looking up the road I did see movement on the road and realized that there were 3 **Kagu** scuttling across the track.



My main target now was Cloven-feathered Dove, though I had not heard a peep all day. I walked the Grand Kaori boardwalk until I reached the viewpoint over the river. I tried a bit of playback but then gave up and tried to entice some Horned Parakeets closer. Leaving the camera behind I walked back up the boardwalk until a couple of tourists came along. Just as they arrived I noticed movement above me, focused the bins and realized a Pigeon Verte





had just arrived above me! I raced back for the camera and the tourists, bless them, kept absolutely still, not knowing what I'd seen, but sensing that I needed their cooperation. Not often people behave like that and so refreshing – if you are reading this, thank you! I showed them the very pretty **Cloven-feathered Dove**, and bagged a few record shots. They drifted off as I continued to try for a

better angle for photos. Suddenly there was a shout from about 20m along the track: “**Cagou!**” They had found a Kagu right by the trail, which then proceeded to follow us and walk along the track right between us, far too close for even the 100mm end of my zoom. The phone was a more useful tool for pics in these circumstances. It was their first wild Kagu and they were blown away by the experience. “*Mais c'est sauvage!*”, he exclaimed to me.



I looked at my watch and decided that I might as well give myself some birding on the drive back through the park so I wandered back to the bus stop in time for the 13.25 navette back to Pont Perignon.

Other than another **White-bellied Goshawk** in flight I didn't see much on the drive back to the park entrance until I was within a km of the park offices. Here there are some pine plantations (GPS -22.143118, 166.731677) and I wandered a track with scrub on one side and pines on the other. I was hoping for a Red-fronted Parakeet (I was unsuccessful) but my attention was immediately grabbed when I saw a finch fly off showing a conspicuous red tail. Sure enough when I pinned this and its mates down I had my first **Red-throated Parrotfinch**. I chased a small group of these, mixed with Green-

backed White-eyes, but could not pin them down for a photo. A **Long-tailed Triller** bombed over, easily identified in flight.

I nosed around the park entrance some more hoping for Parakeets but pretty soon gave up in favour of an earlier-than-expected arrival back into Noumea and the possible credits this would generate. A **White-breasted Woodswallow** was the last bird of the day, hawking from wires at the Yate turnoff. It had been a great day, exceeding all expectations. I was left with only 3 endemic (New Cal Crow, Red-fronted Parakeet and Striated Starling) and 2 non-endemic (South Melanesian Cuckooshrike and Metallic Pigeon) targets left.

### **Taking the family back to Riviere Bleue**

Thursday 6<sup>th</sup> July



When we planned the trip and realized that we would not be able to stay at the place we wanted north of Noumea, we instead pencilled in a day for a trip to Poe Beach about 2 hours north. I was also hopeful of a detour to the Parc des Grands Fougères, the other well-known forest site on Grand Terre and where I hoped I could pick up the remaining endemics and maybe get better views of some others. Poe Beach itself seemed to have some birds I needed too, based on Tommy Pedersen's report. But when I added up the amount of driving, and the day dawned cloudy (our only cloudy day of the entire week) we reconsidered. Plan B was hastily convened and we would do a family trip back to Riviere Bleue and hire bikes – a bit of an active day and a chance for the family to see a Kagu (Erica, much to my surprise last night had been quite gripped off!).

A later start than yesterday was necessary to accommodate teenage sleep patterns, but it was nice to drive back through the “mattoral” in the mountains in the light this time. I never did work out if this was natural habitat, or if the area has been completely deforested. A **Whistling Kite** drifted over the road

at one point, and we would hear the familiar crying whistle of several over the reservoir at Riviere Bleue later in the day.

We arrived around 9.15 and as soon as we'd paid our entrance fee I popped in to the park office to try to find Jean-Marc Meriot to see if he had any more concrete gen on my remaining targets. He wasn't in the office but the chaps directed me back towards the gate and into a pine plantation where I managed to track him down and introduce myself. The bad news was that New Caledonia Crow is very rare in the park and he couldn't suggest any site worth trying. I'd be better off going to Mt Koghis. The news for Red-fronted Parakeet and Melanesian Cuckooshrike was better – they could both be found in this very area of pines along with Horned Parakeet (GPS -22.152027, 166.732697). I filed this away with the intention of returned in the afternoon so as not to test the patience of the family. But as we went to drive off, suddenly he was beckoning me over. He had a **Red-fronted Parakeet** in the tree right in front of him. I struggled to get binoculars out of the boot and arrived in time to see it flush to another pine, but fortunately I was able to locate it for unequivocal tickable views. I ran back to the car to get camera but by now could not relocate it – only a minor tinge of disappointment to a cracking start to the day.

I noted a pair of **Long-tailed Triller** on the drive to Pont Perignon, and a **Barred Honeyeater** at the bridge itself. The bike rentals were not cheap (3000F each for the day – it adds up when you have to multiply by 4) but in good nick. It took us about 30min to cycle along the road to the Grand Kaori. I stopped once as the family rode on when I heard a call that sounded interesting. As I searched for the perpetrator a cracking **Southern Shrikebill** flew across the road, and then in response to a few seconds of playback, sat on a branch rattling away at me while I clicked the shutter.



At the Grand Kaori we walked the boardwalk and I warned the girls they would need to be quiet, careful and lucky to see a Kagu. Secretly I did not have high hopes. As we approached the back stretch where the tame bird had performed so well yesterday suddenly Louisa, in front, stopped and pointed out a **Kagu** no more than 15m in front of us, flicking leaf-litter right next to the track! After we'd all got a decent view we edged forward. Erica wanted some pictures of her own so took over DSLR duty.



But then pretty soon, unconcerned by our presence, it simply walked directly towards us closer than close-focus distance, before stopping next to us about a metre away. We filled our boots with phone camera footage.

As with the previous day, we also saw conspicuous **Yellow-bellied Flyrobins**, **New Caledonian Whistlers** and **Striated Fantails**.



At Gue de la Pourina we stopped for an early picnic lunch and I tried a quick burst of Crow Honeyeater playback. No action, so I sat down for lunch. No sooner had I taken my seat than I heard an unmistakable single rasp that had to be Crow Honeyeater. I jumped up again and ran through one more burst. A fluttering above me had me going until I realized it was in fact a Goliath Imperial Pigeon. But then as I watched the pigeon, a big black honeyeater bombed over and landed out of sight, possibly on the other side of the river. It didn't return.

After lunch we carried on to Pont Germain and then beyond. At the second campsite area (GPS -22.099628, 166.649911) we decided to turn back. I thought I heard a high pitched whistle and wondered if this was a Cuckooshrike. As I searched for the right song to play I pressed the wrong one. Amazingly the cackling sound that my speaker played was answered by something in a tree next to me. I looked down at the phone – “**New**

**Caledonian Crow**”. Well, that was a stroke of luck! I manoeuvred around and then laid eyes, bins, then lens on this nondescript but very special corvid. New Caledonia Crows have the reputation of being the most intelligent bird species, able to solve puzzles and use tools. This particular bird even had his favourite twig (used to prize grubs from holes in tree trunks) in his beak.



Our ride back to Pont Perignon had one further avian highlight. About 800m beyond the Grand Kaori a big black honeyeater flashed right across in front of us! "What was that?" said Nikki, carrying on cycling oblivious to the fact she'd just seen one of the world's rarest birds. I screeched to a halt and could see the stonking **Crow Honeyeater** sat on a branch in the open just inside the forest. I wrestled with the camera, which was inconveniently around my neck and under my shoulder to avoid it swinging too much as I rode, but by the time I was ready, it had hopped to a less photogenic spot. Nevertheless, third Crow Honeyeater in just over 24 hours was not bad going.



Back at the entrance I got the family to indulge me one last time. We drove in to the piney area and I wandered off hoping to reconnect with a NC Red-fronted Parakeet. I was unable to find one, but did come across a party of vocal **Horned Parakeets**, one of which eventually obliged for decent photos. A few **Barred Honeyeaters** were feeding in the scrub behind the pines. A few

times I played the high-pitched note of Melanesian Cuckooshrike but heard nothing.



The family was by now growing restless and I retreated to the car. We began to drive off, but as always, just in case, I had the windows down. A high-pitched, drawn-out, single-toned note drifted across from where I had been. Was that the Cuckooshrike? I grabbed my phone and played the call to myself. Yep, that's exactly what it was, confirmed not just by me, but by unanimous vote in the car. I jumped out and walked briskly to the scrub and played the note again. Nothing. Then a **Rufous Whistler** appeared. Then, after a few more minutes, and as I was on the verge of giving up again another big dark bird (my third goody of the day) flew over and dropped into the tree right next to me,. The **South Melanesian Cuckooshrike** peered at me with piercing yellow eyes set in dark steel grey, wondering where on earth the intruder was.

On the drive home I noted **Sacred Kingfisher** and **Osprey**.

## A brief recce of Mt Koghis

Friday 7<sup>th</sup> July



We were booked on a ferry transfer to our next hotel at 11.30, and I persuaded Nikki that it would be much better for everyone if I got up early and went birding rather than sitting around getting frustrated at wasting a morning waiting for the girls to wake up. So long as I was back in plenty of time to help pack bags, no problem.

Traffic getting out of Noumea was slow but 45mins later I arrived at the Auberge du Mt Khogi. Immediately I heard Horned Parakeet calling by the Auberge but did not see any. There is normally a 500F entry fee for the forest but there was no one at the booth and I had no coins, only 1000F notes. A



quick walk into the forest yielded **Streaked Fantail**, **Fantailed Gerygone**, and **Spotted Dove**, but as often happens it was hard work in the forest itself. I walked back to the Auberge where I tracked down a **New Caledonian Crow**. I was still missing **Striated Starling** but a distant unidentified brown bird was surely an immature one. I grabbed some record shots for later analysis and decided by process of elimination it must be this species. Fortunately a few minutes later I found a group of three adult **Striated Starling**, confirming the last of the endemics. A **Long-tailed Triller** was conspicuous in a tree above me, posing nicely for photos, and then as I was about to leave a pair of **New Caledonian (Red-fronted) Parakeets** flew into the same tree and I was able to bag record shots!



By 9am it was time to head back. I hoped for the final specialty, Metallic Pigeon (for which I had forgotten to download the call so unsure if I had heard one or not), on the drive back down the mountain. A **Goliath Imperial Pigeon** on an electricity post with its back to me had me going for a minute until I saw that it had no white throat. A **Sacred Kingfisher** on wires completed my birding for the morning.



### **Chilling on a tropical beach**

7-9 July

Our last two full days were planned to stay on an islet about 20min ferry ride from Noumea. This proved to be a wonderful couple of days with blue skies, gorgeous warm seas and fantastic snorkeling and other water activities. As on Ilot Amedee, the highlight for me was swimming with turtles. The first morning I went out with Louisa and found one resting on the reef. Erica – gripped off by her sister’s encounter – came snorkeling with me the next morning and we found 2, one of which lazily and unconcerned glided through the water, over the coral and brightly coloured fish, allowing us to swim alongside. Not for the first time I cursed forgetting to bring the GoPro which I had left back in Adelaide. Only once we were back in Australia did Erica grip me off herself. It turns out she also saw a clownfish sheltering in some of the soft coral. I had wandered off and though she (claims to have) called, I didn’t hear.

The final morning I went for a walk, and found 3 more turtles swimming under the hotel pontoon rooms, and later that morning Nikki and I kayaked to this spot and spent a bit of time with one that swam around next to and under us as we paddled quietly.

The Ilot is barely 400m long and both mornings I took the chance to wander around before day-trippers arrived in their yachts and jet-skis. I was able to add a few trip ticks this way, including **Bar-tailed Godwit**, **Ruddy Turnstone**,



**Pacific Golden Plover, Common Waxbill.** Other birds noted on the island were **Silvereye, Rufous Whistler, Buff-banded Rail, Fantailed Gerygone** and **Red-throated Parrotfinch.** A pair of **Osprey** seems to reside here and I saw them perched and fishing on several occasions. My favourite addition to the trip list was a single **Black-naped Tern** that I found on my final morning's walk, not far from where I had turtles.



Our flight on 10<sup>th</sup> was sufficiently early that we could not risk a transfer from the island and be sure of making it to Tontouta airport in time to check in. Instead we left “paradise” and spent our final night at the comfortable and functional Hotel Beurivage in Baie au Citron, just around the point from Anse Vata. The staff here were friendly, the location nice and was half the price of other places. It lacked the pool and spa – and the option of a family room – that were our reasons for choosing Le Lagon earlier in the week, but for us for one night, and as a base for a more birding-heavy trip this would be my recommendation over the more expensive Le Lagon. The drive for the flight added two new raptor species to the list, first a brief glimpse of a **Swamp Harrier**, then, as I refueled the rental car in the village of Tontouta, a **Peregrine** cruised overhead then stooped steeply on some unseen victim at the end of the airstrip.

We have been very lucky to have a number of really lovely family holidays over the years, but rarely have I been able to combine my birding with the rest of the crew's activities in such an effective and seamless way. The combination of a small but quality list, relatively easy birding, accessible sites, and great weather and cool family stuff (especially stunning beaches) was winning. Now I need to find something similar for the next hol and start sowing the seeds. Perhaps by this time next year Nikki will have thought of a new excellent idea ;-).

### Systematic list:

White-faced Heron	3	PPRB, Anse Vata
Pacific Reef-Heron	1	Ilot Maitre
Osprey	2	Ilot Maitre
<b>White-bellied Goshawk</b>	2	PPRB
Whistling Kite	4	PPRB
Swamp Harrier	1	near Tontouta
<b>Kagu</b>	9	PPRB
Buff-banded Rail	+	Amedee, Ilot Maitre
Purple Swamphen	+	Ilot Maitre
Silver Gull	+	
<b>Cloven-feathered Dove</b>	1	PPRB
<b>Goliath Imperial Pigeon</b>	5	PPRB, Mt Koghis
Spotted Dove	+	
Glossy Swiftlet	+	
White-rumped Swiflet	6	PPRB
Sacred Kingfisher	2	Mt Koghis
Peregrine	1	Tontouta
<b>Horned Parakeet</b>	8	PPRB, Mt Koghis
<b>New Caledonian Parakeet</b>	3	PPRB, Mt Koghis
<b>Coconut Lorikeet</b>	+	Anse Vata
<b>New Caledonian Myzomela</b>	4	PPRB
<b>Barred Honeyeater</b>	6	PPRB, Mt Koghis
		Anse Vata, Ilot Amedee, Ilot Maitre,
<b>Grey-eared Honeyeater</b>	+	PPRB
<b>Crow Honeyeater</b>	3	PPRB
<b>New Caledonian Friarbird</b>	6	PPRB
<b>Fan-tailed Gerygone</b>	+	PPRB, Mt Koghis, Ilot Maitre
White-breasted Woodswallow	1	near PPRB
<b>South Melanesian</b>		
<b>Cuckooshrike</b>	2	PPRB, Mt Koghis
<b>Long-tailed Triller</b>	4	PPRB, Mt Koghis
<b>New Caledonian</b>		
<b>Cuckooshrike</b>	2	PPRB
<b>New Caledonian Whistler</b>	10	PPRB, Mt Koghis
Rufous Whistler	10	PPRB, Ilot Maitre
<b>Streaked Fantail</b>	10	PPRB, Mt Koghis
Grey Fantail	1	PPRB
<b>Southern Shrikebill</b>	2	PPRB

<b>New Caledonian Crow</b>	2	PPRB, Mt Koghis
<b>Yellow-bellied Robin</b>	+	PPRB, Mt Koghis
<b>Green-backed White-eye</b>	+	Anse Vata, PPRB, Mt Koghis
Silvereye	+	Ilot Amedee, Ilot Maitre
<b>Striated Starling</b>	5	Mt Koghis
<b>Red-throated Parrotfinch</b>	6	PPRB, Ilot Maitre

41 species

**24 lifers**