

Boigu and Saibai Islands Torres Strait trip report March 2016

Birding Tours Australia - Richard Baxter



Our first day on Boigu had come to an end. We were all sitting around the table on the top deck of our live-aboard vessel 'Eclipse', discussing the day's sightings. We'd seen two special birds, Singing Starling and Orange-fronted Fruit Dove during our day on the island. The sun was setting and we were all enjoying a cool beer or gin & tonic, whilst keeping one last look out for anything that might be crossing over from nearby PNG. It was the first time on these northern islands for most on board and although we'd seen several nice birds during the day, including Ashy-bellied White-eye, the conversation was concentrated on the earlier incredible sighting of Orange-fronted Fruit Dove.

Our trip could not have started any better. We'd come ashore at daybreak and walked through the streets of Boigu finding twenty **Singing Starling** sitting on power lines and in neighbourhood trees. We continued through town with everyone ready to focus on any bird that moved. We checked the local reed beds for vagrant mannikins without success, past the town cemetery someone pointed, "raptor", it was just a Whistling Kite. Then, "pigeons", a flock of Torresian Imperial Pigeons flying along the coast, followed by, "kingfisher", it was a Sacred Kingfisher sitting on the airport runway fence, then, "fruit dove" and wow, there it was, sitting on an exposed branch 50m in front of us. I yelled to the group, "THAT'S AN **ORANGE-FRONTED FRUIT DOVE**, it's the first Australian record!"

The initial panic of making sure everyone had seen it subsided after the bird decided to sit there for at least 15minutes while we walked closer and set up our scope for a closer look. Plenty of photos were taken in the dawn light of what is an unmistakable and truly spectacular bird.



Photo: OFFD. (R.Baxter)



Photo: OFFD. (Joy Tansey)



Photo: Orange-fronted Fruit Dove (Barb Williams)

Our targets for our second day on Boigu were three of the local specialties, Red-capped Flowerpecker, Collared Imperial Pigeon and Coconut Lorikeet. For the Flowerpecker I have sites on both islands but the other two are more hit and miss, with fly-overs the most frequent form of sighting. After breakfast on board we headed into the semi-deciduous vine forest which borders the extensive mangrove forests fringing most of the island.



Photo: Red-capped Flowerpecker (Fred Allsopp)

We walked up to my 'flowerpecker tree' and began our stake out. From past experience the flowerpecker visits the tree every 30min but after an hour there was no appearance. Another hour went by, while we counted Cicadabirds, Tawny-breasted Honeyeaters, Olive-backed Sunbirds and even another Orange-fronted Fruit Dove. Into our third hour we decided to quickly play the call and within a few seconds we had great views of a handsome male **Red-capped (Papuan) Flowerpecker**, another of the island's specialties found nowhere else in Australia but Boigu and Saibai.

After lunch we walked to the other side of town for better views of a rare cinnamon morph Black Bittern which Biggles discovered the previous afternoon. We managed a few photos of this large and unusual bird which I estimated to be nearly 70cm. We also managed to fit in a cruise along the coastline and down the Boigu River. The highlight of our river cruise were two **House Swift** which flew down the river over our boats. Frustratingly I saw two small lorikeets fly past silhouetted by the sun which most likely would have been Red-flanked Lorikeet.



Photo below: Cinnamon morph Black Bittern. (Jenny Spry)



After a couple of days on Boigu it was time to reposition to Saibai. Not long after setting off we came across another two House Swifts while birding from the boat. Our first visit to Saibai we concentrated on the western end of the island where we heard a possible Common Paradise Kingfisher in the mangroves near the cemetery. We walked through the area and searched for an hour without luck. Even though we didn't find any vagrant kingfishers we did see some nice birds including the "Papuan" race of Spangled Drongo, Black Butcherbird, Large-billed Gerygone, Pied Heron, Rufous-banded Honeyeater and Shining Flycatcher.

After a relatively quiet day we headed into the wetlands for a look at the local evening duck roost. As we approached, flocks of Radjah Shelduck, Grey Teal and Pacific Black Ducks descended on the area and by the time we arrived there were about 500 ducks in the area. We weren't there long when I saw a small pale duck fly in and land with a group of Grey Teal. I said to Biggles, "that could have been a Garganey." A quick scan of the flocks and I couldn't see anything unusual. Five minutes later Sue Lashko found an 'unusual' duck, so I walked over to the scope and there was a cracking male **GARGANEY** swimming with the teal. The brown head and prominent white eyebrow stood out and soon we'd all had great scope views of this rare Palearctic migrant. In the fading light we took a few long range ID photos and made a late dash for the boat a very happy bunch of birders.



Gargany Photo Centre: (Barb Williams)



Photo: Boigu. (R.Baxter)

Over the next couple of days we continued to explore the island finding many of the sub species endemic to these two northern islands and the Trans Fly. The local sub species of Orange-footed Scrubfowl, Peaceful Dove, Torresian Imperial Pigeon, Barking Owl, Little Kingfisher, Tawny-breasted Honeyeater, Red-headed Honeyeater, Northern Fantail, Willie Wagtail, Black Butcherbird and Torresian Crow were all located on Saibai but by the final afternoon we had still not seen or heard a single Coconut Lorikeet or Collared Imperial Pigeon.

By the final afternoon we had given up on the finding any lorikeets but there was one last chance to find the imperial pigeon, a three hour cruise. We travelled in our zodiacs down the two Saibai rivers and along the coast. As we cruised the coastline two stunning **Collared Imperial Pigeons** crossed the channel directly in front of us flying from Kaumag Island across to Saibai. They positioned themselves perfectly in the afternoon light giving us great views of this spectacular pigeon.

It was a wonderful way to end a very successful tour.

The second trip to Boigu and Saibai started the next day and we once again briefly dropped into Little Tuesday Island on our way north from Horn Island to see Ashy-bellied (Pale) White-eye. With the white-eye in the bag, we had a relaxing cruise north. The tides on Boigu early in the week were extremely low so we decided to do the tour in reverse order and start on Saibai, which turned out to be a great decision.



We went ashore on Saibai early the first morning in our two tenders. As everyone was coming ashore off the first boat a few **Coconut Lorikeets** flew overhead. By the time the second tender arrived they'd gone. Incredibly this was the species we neither heard nor saw the previous week and implausibly the very first species we saw this week.

After a couple of hours birding near the cemetery we decided to walk east along the water front and leave Geoff at the Cemetery to do some photography. We stopped briefly to check out the wetlands and as we were scanning the area two **Pacific Swallows** sailed past in the strong breeze. Despite a search of the area we couldn't relocate them but we would find a flock of eight the follow day.

After lunch it was time to head back into the wetlands in search of the Garganey. As we approached the site I could see there were significantly less waterfowl present than the previous week. The night before our tour started the island was subject to a huge downpour which filled the interior of the island with water. The ducks were now dispersed far and wide and the 500 from the previous week was now 50 and none of those were our Garganey.

We'd been at the site for a couple of hours without luck and then just as we were considering leaving we spotted a Peregrine Falcon chasing another bird towards us from the direction of the local supermarket. Immediately we realised it was an imperial pigeon and not a Torresian. As it flew away all I could make out was the pale head and I told the group it could be a Purple-tailed Imperial Pigeon, then just after that it changed directions towards us and the falcon gave up its pursuit. It banked nicely above us in the fading evening light and we were able to take a quick photo showing all the diagnostic features of **ZOE'S IMPERIAL PIGEON**.

Below: Zoe's Imperial Pigeon (Steve Reynolds)



On our first trip we found a new bird for Australia on the first day and incredibly we'd done it again on day one of the second trip. We might have dipped on the Garganey but we weren't complaining.

Back on the boat that night Geoff told us of another brief sighting of possible Red-flanked Lorikeet at the cemetery. With that information we started the day again at the western end of town in the hope of seeing these small lorikeets from nearby coastal PNG. We spent a couple of hours in the area and although we had no lorikeets we did have nice views of a flock of eight Pacific Swallows.



Above: All eyes on the Garganey (Barb Williams)



Pacific Swallow (Steve Reynolds)

During the day we visited the eastern end of town and had brief views of the local small *dogwa* sub-species of Brown Goshawk before heading into the coastal vine forest in search of the Flowerpecker. As we entered the forest on the edge of town we flushed a fruit dove, which after 40 minutes of searching was identified as Superb Fruit Dove. Arriving at my **Red-capped Flowerpecker** site we were rewarded with excellent views of this highly sought-after species.

We decided once again to finish the day at the Garganey site and like the afternoon before, the next incredible sighting came just as we had nearly given up for the day. As we scanned the wetlands, a storm approached from the northwest. The sky turned black and we noticed a flock of Pacific Swifts travelling on the storm front towards us. We noticed a smaller swiftlet amongst the flock, then another, then another and as I scanned back towards the storm the sky was full of **UNIFORM SWIFTLETS**. The flock was spread out and we estimated there was conservatively sixty swiftlets, which eventually travelled in front of us and away towards the far eastern end of the island, which co-incidentally was where our boat was moored. Following this spectacle we made our way back to our boat where we enjoyed a wonderful dinner whilst reminiscing over yet another great day.



On our third day on Saibai I decided to change things around and do one last search for the elusive duck in the morning. We wandered around the wetlands for a couple of hours again without success and were soon back in the zodiacs heading to the boat for an early lunch. As we motored east along the Saibai coastline a large black aquilla eagle soared towards us along the treetops. It didn't take long to identify it as a magnificent **GURNEY'S EAGLE**.

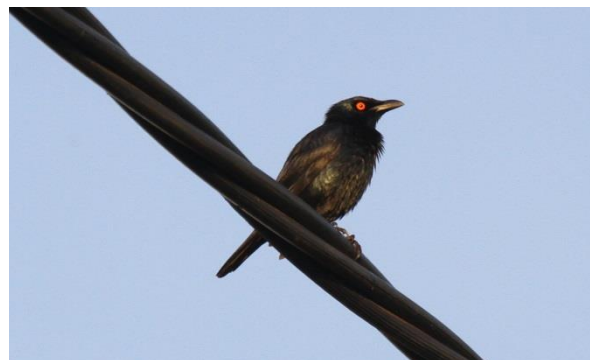
One of the World's hardest to see eagles, near threatened with global extinction, mainly due to habitat loss, it menacingly patrolled up and down the coastline stirring up a flock of Magpie Geese and generally looking fittingly breathtaking for what is an absolute world mega. This species is

always high on everyone's wish list on these trips to Boigu and Saibai and this was our third sighting in eight trips and certainly the best.



With several mouth-watering species on our trip list we still had two of the local specialties to find, Collared Imperial Pigeon and Singing Starling. With those two species in mind we repositioned to Boigu where we were soon ashore and having nice views of **Singing Starling** as we walked through town. We set ourselves up at the site we'd seen the Orange-fronted Fruit Dove the week before which is nicely located where several large mangrove trees and emergent canopy species provide a sharp transition to the edge of town and provide quite a few convenient perches for our target species.

Below: Singing Starling (Joy Tansey)



We staked the site out for a few hours and saw Ciciadabird, Dollarbird, White-throated Needletails, Brush Cuckoo and an assortment of more common local species but not our targets. After a nice lunch on board we spent the afternoon exploring the local Boigu Rivers where we had brief views of a possible Chestnut Rail and frustratingly had three all dark imperial pigeons fly quickly across the river too quick for us to ID.

Our final day on the northern islands began with a dawn start at the 'fruit-dove site' again. Walking from town to the site we had nice views of **House Swift** and **Uniform Swiftlet** and after an hour of watching and waiting a **Collared Imperial Pigeon** flew over the top of us from the mangroves towards town. It was a brief fly-over but long enough to get a few photos to confirm the ID. With the last of the local specialties in the bag there was just one more MEGA to show itself.

While we birded the area a small fruit dove flew over our heads from the vine forest into the mangroves. Luckily we were in an open area near the garbage tip which allowed reasonable views and a lone photograph. My first impression was the small size, clearly smaller than the Superb and Orange-fronted Fruit Doves seen in recent days. With a green back and green chest I initially thought it could have been an Orange-bellied Fruit Dove but I didn't see an orange belly, only yellow on the vent. The identification would have to wait until we could look at the photo back on the boat.

On the boat we enlarged the blurred and out of focus photo to clearly see what I had noticed in the field, green back, green chest and yellow vent. The photo also showed what we didn't see in the field, the purple (lilac) cap, clinching the ID as **CORONATED FRUIT DOVE**, one of the common lowland fruit doves of nearby PNG and one of the species I had hoped to one day see on these islands.



It had been a long and somewhat tiring but incredibly successful trip on which we had found all the possible target species as well as a spectacular list of rarities. However, without doubt the group of birds for which this trip was most memorable were the doves and pigeons. We'd previously seen Pinon's Imperial Pigeon (Nov 2008) on the Boigu River and Rohan Clarke had photographed Orange-bellied Fruit Dove also on Boigu but there still remained a long list of possible species that could one day be seen on these islands. Having led eight trips to the islands at different times of the year I was beginning to doubt whether we would see any of them but this trip certainly put an end to those doubts.

The biggest dip of the trip were the two sightings of what would have most certainly been Red-flanked Lorikeet. That the sightings were on both islands suggested that this species was present in low numbers rather than just a pair of birds seen multiple times. There are certainly three or four lorikeet species in nearby lowland PNG that may well one day be sighted on Boigu or Saibai, at this stage we've left them for future trips.

Thank you very much to all the wonderful participants who helped make this such a thoroughly rewarding tour and enjoyable fortnight, as well as a big thankyou to the crew of the Eclipse FNQ, who worked tirelessly to ensure our time aboard was comfortable, rewarding and enjoyable as well as the residents of Boigu and Saibai who made us welcome on their islands.

Our top dozen birds:

- 1. Orange-fronted Fruit Dove**
- 2. Zoe's Imperial Pigeon**
- 3. Coroneted Fruit Dove**
- 4. Garganey**
- 5. Gurney's Eagle**
- 6. Uniform Swiftlet**
- 7. Collared Imperial Pigeon**
- 8. House Swift**
- 9. Red-capped (Papuan) Flowerpecker**
- 10. Singing Starling**
- 11. Pacific Swallow**
- 12. Coconut Lorikeet**

Our next trips to Boigu & Saibai are in March 2018 and 2019. If you would like a spot please let us know.

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Red-capped (Papuan) Flowerpecker: Joy Tansey



Above: Tania, Jenny, Biggles and Richard.



Above: New Guinea traders @ Saibai and Bianca with lunch. (Barb Williams)