

# Torres Strait Trip Report 2018

## Boigu and Saibai Islands

Birding Tours Australia – Richard Baxter -

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In March 2018, Birding Tours Australia conducted four back-to-back birding tours to the Queensland (Torres Strait) islands of Boigu and Saibai. Tours 1,2 & 4 were seven days duration visiting Boigu and Saibai. Tour three also planned to visit Ugar Island during the nine-day excursion.

### Trip 1.

At 6.30am on the 4<sup>th</sup> of March we all boarded the shuttle bus on Horn Island and headed down to the local jetty where we boarded Eclipse FNQ for a week of birding on Queensland's two most northerly islands, Boigu and Saibai.



Before pointing the boat north, we had one important stop only 30min away. Little Tuesday Island has been our go-to spot for Ashy-bellied (Pale) White-eye for the last twelve years and once again not long after going ashore we had six **ASHY-BELLIED WHITE-EYE** in the trees at the back of the beach.



Above: Ashy-bellied White-eye (John Stirling)

Our first morning on Boigu was a cracking success. We landed in the pre-dawn light and made our way through town to the forest edge where we watched and waited. Our first sighting was a flock of thirty Torresian Imperial-pigeon, followed by Cicadabird and Varied Honeyeater. After a while, two Pacific Swifts approached from the west and passed overhead. We soon had six Pacific Swifts and three **HOUSE SWIFT**. These were later joined by a lone **PACIFIC SWALLOW** and a dozen White-throated Needletail.

The first of the local specialties arrived half an hour later when a **SINGING STARLING** perched on an exposed branch in front of the group. The second followed quickly, when a lone **COLLARED IMPERIAL PIGEON**, cruised overhead, allowing a few photos to be taken before disappearing into the riparian forest. What a morning, what a start to the first day on the islands! Happy with our outing, we returned to the boat where our on-board chef prepared us a hot breakfast.



Above: Collared Imperial Pigeon (Richard Baxter)

We were soon back on the island and into the coastal forest in search of the next local specialty. A short walk to the stake-out tree and before long a cracking male **RED-CAPPED FLOWERPECKER** appeared in the canopy. We coaxed it closer and as it descended the group took photo after photo as the flowerpecker positioned itself in the lower branches.





Red-capped Flowerpecker (R.Baxter)

With time spare before lunch we found a shady spot with plenty of good perch trees nearby and played a few calls of species found in nearby coastal PNG. We started with Rufous-bellied Kookaburra with no response, followed by Mimic Honeyeater. As I played the call, Scott yelled out, "I've got a Lewin's type honeyeater over hear." We all rushed over to see it move to the back of the tree and depart through the forest. Incredibly the plan had worked, Australia's first **MIMIC HONEYEATER!** We searched for another ten minutes without success and went back to playing a few calls of species like Golden Monarch and Yellow-bellied Gerygone. The only bird to investigate was Leaden Flycatcher and it was soon time to head back to the boat for lunch. We decided to play the mimic call once again and instantly it darted into the tree in front of us from deeper in the forest. It departed as quickly as it arrived and some of the group had better views than they had with the earlier sighting. Disappointingly, no one was able to get a photo.

After a relaxing break in the heat of the day we jumped in the zodiacs and slowly motored down two of the island's rivers, finding Brown-backed Honeyeater, Dollarbird, Torresian Imperial-pigeon, Mangrove Gerygone *ssp pallida*, Tawny-breasted Honeyeater *ssp saturator* and Cicadabird. The highlight was a stunning **Collared Imperial-pigeon** perched on an exposed branch in a river side tree.





The following day began with another cruise along two of Boigu's Rivers where we found several more **Collared Imperial Pigeons**, Varied Honeyeater, Sacred Kingfisher, Rufous-banded Honeyeater, Shining Flycatcher and Spangled (Papuan) Drongo *ssp carbonarius*.



After breakfast we visited the coastal forest in search of the **Mimic Honeyeater**, once again positioning ourselves for photos. With six DSLR cameras poised for action I once again played the call and within seconds our target flew in over our heads and landed in a nearby tree. It touched down for a second and darted off. Once again, no pics.

We continued to explore the island and on the final morning went ashore for one last crack at the Mimic Honeyeater as there were still four people that hadn't had good enough views and we still didn't have a photo. We walked to the site and played the call but this time there was no sign of it.

Walking to the site we noticed a few Pacific Swifts flying overhead and we began scanning the skies for something different. It wasn't long and the first **UNIFORM SWIFTLET** cruised overhead, followed by a couple more.



Above: Uniform Swiftlet (John Stirling)

That afternoon we cruised the Boigu River but failed to add any species to the trip list, so we set course for Saibai, where one of our first species seen was Great-billed Heron flying along the waterfront.



An early start on the island and we staked out a site on the western end of the island that had been good to us in the past. The birding was productive and enjoyable with a constant flow of species through the coastal trees and passing overhead. Our morning began with several Channel-billed Cuckoo and White-throated Needletail migrating north. Flocks of Torresian Imperial-pigeons flew along the coastline while **Collared Imperial-pigeons** crossed back and forth over our heads. A flock of noisy Metallic Starling passed by and the resident Osprey flew back and forth carrying nesting material. Undoubtedly, the best bird of the morning were several **COCONUT LORIKEETS**, the last of the local specialties, which screeched noisily overhead.



Coconut Lorikeet (John Stirling)

Our final morning on Saibai began once again on the edge of the forest, under a well-used flight path for species arriving on the island from the north. We kept up a vigil for three hours seeing Superb Fruit-Dove, Dusky Honeyeater, Black-faced Monarch, Tree Martin and Varied Triller. Just as we were leaving Biggles sighted a large fruit dove in the canopy of a nearby tree. He called us all over to see Australia's first ever **PINK-SPOTTED FRUIT DOVE**. An incredible start to our final day.



We returned to the boat a very happy bunch of birders and repositioned to the spot where we'd seen Gurney's Eagle on previous trips. We kept a watch from the top deck and soon spotted a large black **GURNEY'S EAGLE** soaring in the distance. We quickly jumped in the zodiacs and took off down the channel but failed to re find it. We didn't have to wait long and it re-appeared behind the boat just as we started lunch, soaring closer and closer, eventually peeling off to the north and out of sight.



It had been an excellent week of birding with a great list of rare species and nice views of the local specialties. We all enjoyed a delicious final night's dinner prepared by our on-board chef, Meg and celebrated a couple of birding milestones achieved during the trip, including Nigel's 800<sup>th</sup> bird, before heading south towards Thursday Island.



**Birding Tours Australia - Torres Strait 2020 tour dates:**

**1-7 March 2020 Boigu and Saibai Islands.**

**7 days \$4500**



## Tour 2

Trip two started under clear skies and smooth seas as everyone settled into their rooms and familiarised themselves with the boat. After the introductory and safety briefing we were quickly ashore and soon had several **Ashy-bellied White-eye** in the beach front trees, including a bird bringing food to a nest. Also present were Brown Honeyeater, Mangrove Golden Whistler, Rose-crowned Fruit-Dove, Spectacled Monarch and Red-headed Honeyeater. With the white-eye seen well we set sail for Boigu.



The second day of the trip began at the forest edge on Boigu Island and finished with a slow afternoon cruise down two of the island's rivers.

The morning session started with a few Metallic Starling, as well as, Papuan Drongo, Large-billed Gerygone *ssp brunneipectus*, Cicadabird and Forest Kingfisher. We didn't have to wait long for the first of the trip's local specialties to show in the form of a lone **Singing Starling**. A constant parade of birds through the area kept us busy until Darryl spotted a **Uniform Swiftlet** approaching from behind. Flying into the wind, the small all grey swiftlet provided nice views before moving off across the mangroves.



Migrating White-throated Needletail were passing through, as were Dollarbirds returning north after their summer in Australia. Our next local specialty to reveal itself was a **Collared Imperial-pigeon** that crossed in front of us level with the tree line. Unfortunately, only a few of the group saw it and had to wait until later in the day until we had our first perched bird and better views of birds in flight.



Our afternoon boat cruise down two of Boigu's creeks produced a nice Papuan Eclectus Parrot *ssp polychloros*, a couple more **Collared Imperial-pigeons** as well as migrating flocks of Dollarbirds and Torresian Imperial-pigeons, while Little Tern and White-winged Tern fed in the nearby channel.

The next morning we went ashore before dawn to chase up a nightjar sighting. We walked to the site in the pre-dawn and located a Large-tailed Nightjar close to the island's runway. Our next target was the flowerpecker but first we staked out some nearby trees while we waited for better light. While we waited we witnessed the remarkable sight of waves of **Uniform Swiftlets** coming down the coast and over our heads. By the time we had left we'd seen an extraordinary seventy-six **Uniform Swiftlets**, a single **House Swift**, two Pacific Swifts and four White-throated Needletail.



Above: House Swift (R.Baxter)

We walked into the forest in search of the flowerpecker and as we did the skies opened and the rain began. Despite an hour of standing near the flowerpecker tree the bird took the dry option and failed to show. We returned to the boat for warm drinks and muffins. The flowerpecker would have to wait till later.

The following morning the weather cleared and we again walked to the flowerpecker site and waited for it's arrival. The local forest supports a variety of species and while we searched for our target, we were kept busy with Red-headed Honeyeater *ssp infuscta*, Tawny-breasted Honeyeater, Shining



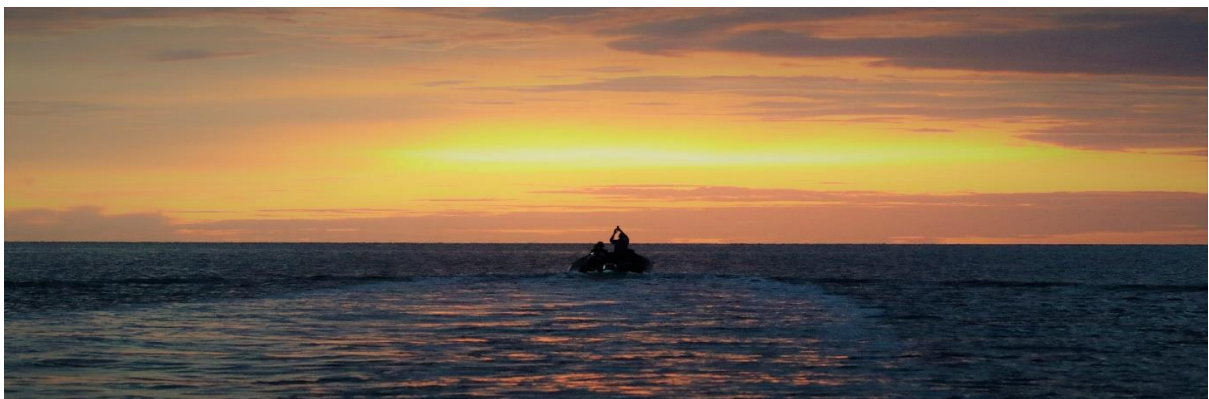
Flycatcher and Olive-backed Sunbirds. Our patience was soon rewarded with a stunning little male **Red-capped Flowerpecker** which hung around long enough for us all to see and for a few photos to be taken.

The site where we had the **Mimic Honeyeater** was nearby, so we walked a bit further and positioned ourselves for the much needed photo. I played the call and like last week, it darted into a tree about 15m away directly in front of where Bernie was standing. Bernie got brief views but like last week it only stayed for a couple of seconds and was quickly gone. Unfortunately no one else saw much more than a silhouette and once again no one could get a photo.

Not long after, as we were preparing to leave, a fruit dove landed nearby which got our pulses racing as we positioned to see it. It eventually revealed itself as a Superb Fruit-Dove and regrettably not one of the much sort after PNG vagrants. Nevertheless, it was great to see this often cryptic species perch out in the open for as all to enjoy.



We returned to Eclipse for lunch and the crew set sail for Saibai. We arrived mid afternoon and finished the day with a nice river cruise along the northern coastline.



We spent a productive two full days on Saibai Island exploring the coastal forest and local waterways. We quickly added several new species to the trip list and continued to see good numbers of **Collared Imperial-pigeons**, giving the trip's photographers opportunity to get that perfect shot. A morning session near town produced Orange-footed Scrubfowl ssp reinwardt, Eclectus Parrot, Pacific Koel, Torresian Kingfisher as well as the small local Southern PNG *dogwa* ssp of Brown Goshawk.



Above: *dogwa* ssp of Brown Goshawk (R.Baxter)



We positioned Eclipse an hour away from town, in the heart of Gurney's Eagle territory and waited for it to cruise past on the late morning thermals. It was first spotted soaring a kilometre away behind the boat so we jumped in the zodiacs and headed east along the channel for better views. We spent the next twenty minutes watching a lone **Gurney's Eagle** soaring over the island. The following day we saw it again at roughly the same time.



Above: Gurney's Eagle (R.Baxter)





Most of the group needed better photos of the flowerpecker after seeing it on Boigu in overcast and showery weather, so we went into the forest in search of the smallest of the local specialties. As we walked to the site, Tawny-breasted, Varied, Dusky, Brown and Rufous-banded Honeyeaters were common, as were Spangled Drongo, Large-billed and Mangrove Gerygone *ssp pallida*. We arrived at the flowerpecker site and soon had a spectacular male **Red-capped Flowerpecker** showing well for us all and providing some nice photographic opportunities.



Above: Red-capped Flowerpecker (R.Baxter)



Above: Mud crab lunch

After a delicious lunch of local Mud Crab we headed back onto the island for our final session with the hope of seeing Coconut Lorikeet, which we had so far failed to connect with during the week. While we searched, Darryl spotted a possible Pacific Swallow as it briefly popped up above the tree line but it was quickly gone and we couldn't relocate it. After three hours of searching we didn't find any lorikeets and returned to our boat for a refreshing drink and the trip's final night dinner.

Although we dipped on the lorikeet, we'd had some cracking views of the other local specialties, found a couple of good vagrants and saw most of the local Papuan subspecies on the islands that are found no where else in Australia. We'd all had a great trip and we set a course back to Horn Island where we had a nice combined group dinner with those arriving for trip 3.

## TRIP 3



Above: Emerald Monitor (R.Baxter)

Everyone on trip three had previously seen the white-eye so we headed straight to Boigu Island. Our first morning was spent ashore where we had our first **Collared Imperial-pigeons** and **Singing Starlings**. Migrating Dollarbirds, Rufous Fantails, Pacific Swifts and Channel-billed Cuckoos kept us busy, while a few **Uniform Swiftlets** finished off the morning nicely.



Above: Channel-billed Cuckoo (R.Baxter)

After a late breakfast we returned to the island and tried unsuccessfully for Mimic Honeyeater. Graham was the only person who hadn't seen the flowerpecker previously so we both went in search of it while the others checked out an area of nearby forest. Half an hour went by with no sign of our target but just as we had picked up our backpacks and prepared to leave, Graham caught a flash of red in the foliage and was onto a cracking male **Red-capped Flowerpecker** mid-level in the tree directly in front of us. Success, we had three of the four local specialties before lunch on day one.



Above: Red-capped Flowerpecker (R.Baxter)



Over the next two days we explored the Boigu River and two of the local creeks as well as spending each dawn searching the forests and open areas for rarities. The local southern PNG race *melaleuca* of Willie Wagtail was abundant as was the Southern New Guinea race of Black Butcherbird, *alecto*. Great-billed Heron and Orange-footed Scrubfowl were seen in the mangroves, as were Little Kingfisher *ssp pusilla* and Metallic Starling. In the nearby vine thicket we saw, Red-headed Honeyeater, Cicadabird, Shinning Flycatcher and Northern Fantail *ssp gularis*. In the open areas we recorded Electus Parrot, Pheasant Coucal and good numbers of migrating White-throated Needletail and Pacific Swifts, both heading north. While visiting the local forest we also found two stunning Emerald Monitors sunning themselves conveniently at eye height.



After making the crossing to Saibai Island we began our search for the last of the local specialties, Coconut Lorikeet.

We spent the first afternoon near the cemetery, close to the coast where the mangroves merge into vine thicket and wet grassland. As we walked into an open area a small dark green fruit dove without a pale terminal band on the tail flushed across in front of us. From the limited views we had it looked like an Orange-bellied Fruit-Dove but neither Biggles or I saw an orange belly. Despite a search we failed to relocate it again and it remained unidentified.

We started the next morning near the cemetery, following up the previous evenings fruit dove sighting. Right at the entrance we found a Superb Fruit-Dove uncharacteristically perched in the open, allowing us to walk underneath and take a few photos.





Whilst birding the island we saw forty Collared Imperial-pigeons, fifty Uniform Swiftlets, over a thousand migrating Pacific Swifts as well as the PNG race *theirfelderi* of Pheasant Coucal.



Over the last few days a cyclone had formed south of us and we weren't able to make the crossing to Ugar Island. With strong northerly winds we were also unable to land on the island, so we headed around to a safe anchorage out of the wind and sat in a wide channel between two islands, which also just happened to be in the middle of the local Gurney's Eagle territory and also a flyway for birds crossing to PNG.







Above: Uniform Swiftlets (R.Baxter)

Our targets for the next two days were Coconut Lorikeet and Gurney's Eagle. It didn't take long to spot a large black eagle with broad bulging secondaries soaring behind the boat. An hour later two **Gurney's Eagles** were spotted soaring together, which was the first time more than one bird had been recorded.

Back on the boat we had a nice lunch while sheltered in the channel and in the heat of the afternoon most decided to have a rest as our late afternoon boat trip wasn't until 4pm. At 3.15pm eagle eyed Jenny Spry and Sue Taylor, alone on the top deck, heard two lorikeets approaching the boat with an unusual call. Seconds later two **RED-FLANKED LORIKEETS** flew across the front of the boat quickly disappearing over the tree tops towards PNG.

As we prepared for the boat trip we were all gearing up at the back of the boat when the call went out, "lorikeets !" Directly behind the boat, crossing the channel were two **Coconut Lorikeets**, the first we'd seen in two weeks. Two people didn't see them so we continued our search.



Above: Coconut Lorikeet (R.Baxter)

We headed off on our afternoon cruise, slowly drifting east along the coast while **Collared Imperial-pigeons**, Spangled Drongo, Radjah Shellducks and Pacific Swifts cruised overhead. We'd only been gone thirty minutes when the sky turned black and cloud to cloud lightning began to make its way towards us. We turned back and spent the rest of the afternoon birding from the boat.



Our final morning on the island began with a 6am start. Four people opted for a river cruise where they had nice views of several **Coconut Lorikeets** and the trip's first Lemon-bellied Flyrobin. The rest of us opted to stay on the boat where we enjoyed three flocks of passing **Coconut Lorikeets** much to the relief of the two people that missed them yesterday afternoon.



With all the local specialties in the bag we opted for a final afternoon sunset cruise along the coast where we saw both White-winged and Little Tern feeding in the shallows as well as passing Pacific Swifts, bee-eaters and Uniform Swiftlets. Undoubtedly, the highlight was lone **Pacific Swallow** blown across from the mainland on the strong northerlies.

We finished the trip with a final night dinner prepared by our on board chef, Meg. We toasted to Joy's 800<sup>th</sup> Oz bird, had a nice desert, picked up the anchor and headed for Horn Island. It had a once again been a great trip with a great bunch of birders.



## Trip 4



Above: Red-capped Flowerpecker (Richard Baxter)

The final trip of 2018 started on a windy morning at Horn Island, adjacent to Thursday Island, the administrative centre of the Torres Strait. We decided to leave the visit to Little Tuesday Island for Ashy-bellied White-eye until the return trip when calm weather was forecast. Twelve hours later we motored into our mooring at Boigu Island and prepared for the week of birding ahead.

Our first morning was spent ashore near the main township and nearby runway. Over the next three hours we were kept busy with a constant stream of species perching on the nearby exposed branches, flying over or feeding in the forest. Highlights were Superb Fruit-Dove, Varied Triller, Tawny-breasted Honeyeater and Torresian Kingfisher. It was soon time to see the first of the local specialties and for that we needed to head to the local supermarket, where perched on the overhead wires outside were six **Singing Starling**. We finished the afternoon with a cruise on the local Boigu River.



Day two on Boigu started with a dawn vigil at the end of the runway where not long after arriving we saw the second of the local specialties when a lone **Collared Imperial-pigeon** flew overhead. Not long after that several waves of White-throated Needletails started to pass over on their northward migration. In all, we saw over a hundred migrating swifts which were periodically accompanied by Rainbow Bee-eaters, Channel-billed Cuckoo and Dollarbirds, all on their journeys north.





After two hours at the site we noticed an approaching storm coming across from PNG. Within a few minutes the first Pacific Swifts appeared followed by a lone **House Swift**. Searching along the storm front we located three **Uniform Swiftlets** and a lone **Pacific Swallow**. Looking deeper into the storm about a kilometre away we could see far more swifts but the storm moved away from us and soon they were gone and we were back to clear skies.

The high light of our final afternoon on Boigu was a river cruise. We motored to the river mouth and were greeted by over one hundred Little and White-winged Terns feeding on the tidal outflow. We nosed our zodiacs to the edge of the feeding area and watched the spectacle from our front row seats.



Above: Saibai Island Water front. (R.Baxter)

With two of the four local specialties seen and two rarities on the trip list we headed for Saibai in search of Coconut Lorikeet and the flowerpecker. Our first morning was spent near the cemetery where we spent a couple of busy hours watching Dusky Honeyeaters, Papuan Drongo, Red-headed Honeyeater, Orange-footed Scrubfowl, Northern Fantail, Shining Flycatchers and Varied Trillers

conduct their usual morning activities while migrating Dollarbirds, Rainbow Bee-eaters, Channel-billed Cuckoos and Pacific Swifts flew overhead on their yearly northward migration to PNG.



Above: Red-capped Flowerpecker (R.Baxter)

Later in the morning we walked into the mangroves and the nearby vine thicket in search of our next target, the flowerpecker. As we walked in, I heard a call and we investigated for a while but no joy. We continued on and tried another two locations which were also unsuccessful. As a final stop I tried the original spot we first saw them back in September 2002 and out flew a beautiful male **Red-capped Flowerpecker**. Usually they dart around from branch to branch and can be difficult to photograph but this was the most obliging bird we'd ever encountered. It co-operatively perched on a nearby branch and sat and watched us for ten minutes showing off his red adult plumage.....fantastic!

After purchasing a few Mud Crab off the locals we moved to the far side of the island in search of our next two targets.



Above: Group photo. Mud Crab lunch on the top deck. (R.Baxter)

We spent the next two days listening for lorikeets and scanning the sky for eagles. In the past we'd seen Gurney's Eagle soaring on the late morning thermals but after three days of scanning it had failed to show. Although we dipped on the eagle we still had many memorable moments including watching a flock of one hundred **Uniform Swiftlets** cruise overhead and over ten **Collared Imperial-pigeons** moving between islands.





Above: Collared Imperial-pigeon (R.Baxter)



While watching for eagles required scanning the skies in all directions, waiting for lorikeets to appear was a somewhat easier task. We lazed around the boat and listened for the lorikeet flight call. It didn't take long but only happened once. Mid afternoon someone heard the well known distinctive call and yelled, "lorikeets". We jumped up to see two **Coconut Lorikeets** fly across the channel in front of the boat. The last of the local Northern Torres Strait specialty birds.



Above: Coconut Lorikeets (R.Baxter)

We had dinner under a full moon on a calm glassy evening after a magnificent Torres Strait sunset and then set a course south for the trip's final birding destination, Little Tuesday Island.





Above: Sunset on our final night at Saibai (R.Baxter)

At 9.30am the next morning we stepped into the dinghy for the last time and made the short trip to the sandy beach on the western side of the island. Once ashore we tracked down 5-6 Ashy-bellied White-eye in the vine thicket and after half an hour on the island returned to Eclipse for our final lunch. Sadly it was time to say goodbye at the airport to catch the departure flights home. Thank you for an awesome trip.



Thank you to everyone for making these such a fun, enjoyable, successful and memorable Birding Tours Australia trips to Saibai and Boigu Islands. We recorded over one hundred species during the tours, including two new Australian records. The four tours had been a fun and great adventure with a wonderful group of friendly and enthusiastic participants.

Thanks must go to the crew of Eclipse FNQ, Joe, Bianca, Jack and Meg for their hospitality as well as Lisa Preston behind the scenes and the Councillors and PBC Chairs on both islands for permission to visit their islands.

**We'll next visit Boigu and Saibai in March 2020.**



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