

Torres Strait Trip Report 2020
Boigu, Saibai and Ugar Islands Queensland
Birding Tours Australia
Richard Baxter



Top dozen birds of the season

1. Stephan's Emerald Dove
2. Long-tailed Honey Buzzard
3. Variable Goshawk
4. Papuan Spinetail
5. Gurney's Eagle
6. Uniform Swiftlet
7. Red-capped Flowerpecker
8. Collared Imperial Pigeon
9. Singing Starling
10. House Swift
11. Hudsonian Whimbrel
12. Ashy-bellied White-eye

Tour 1

Our group met on Horn Island the night prior to the tour where we enjoyed a swim in the hotel pool and a nice Chinese meal prior to the trip briefing. The following morning we boarded Eclipse FNQ and after a short one hour cruise stopped at Tuesday Island where we spent an hour with our main target **ASHY-BELLIED WHITE-EYE**. While on the island we also saw **Mangrove Golden Whistler**, **Dusky Honeyeater** and **Spectacled Monarch**. An added bonus were a couple of **Black-naped Terns** cruising the shallows around the island. The rest of the day we motored north towards Boigu finding **Brown Booby** and **Little Tern** along the way.

Our first morning on Boigu was productive and we found two of our main targets before lunch. We staked out a few trees at the edge of town at dawn and started the day with a quick fly-by of a lone Collared Imperial-pigeon. An hour later another **COLLARED IMPERIAL-PIGEON** provided much better

views as it flew across the tree tops and circled in front us. A cracking bird to start the trip with and undoubtedly Australia's nicest imperial-pigeon. Below: Collared Imperial-pigeon (R.Baxter)



After a quick breakfast we again walked around the perimeter of town and found five **SINGING STARLING**, our second local speciality. Our afternoon boat trip provided nice perched views of another Collared Imperial-pigeon. We returned to the boat under dark and stormy skies. Exactly the weather we come to the Torres Strait at this time of year to find and exactly the kind of weather that produces vagrants from nearby PNG.

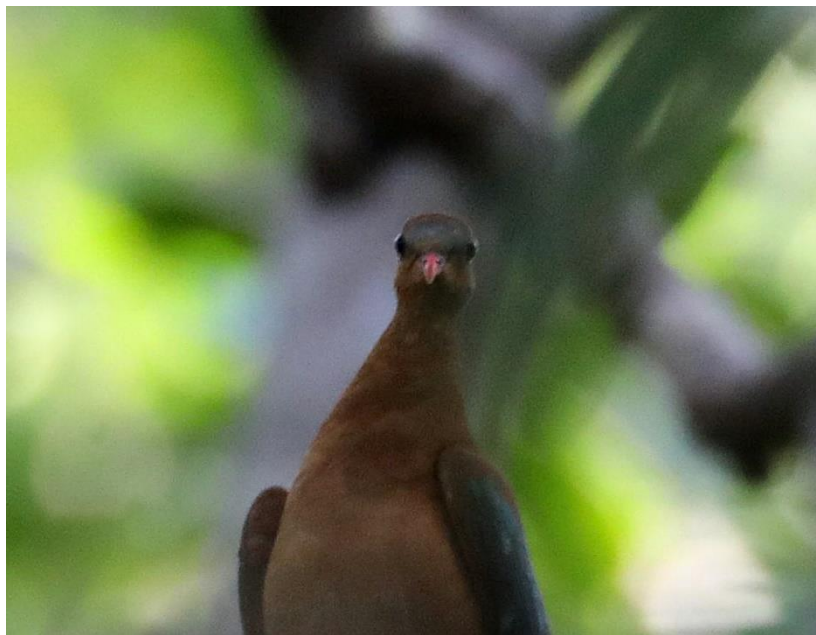


The following morning was one of those special Boigu mornings which produced another first Australian record of a species. We'd been on the island since 6am and walked into an area of forest where Tania and Anne-Marie saw a perched emerald dove. This bird had a large obvious white forehead and Tania called the rest of us. Four of us managed to get a look before another one flew past and the perched bird departed with it. It was Australia's first ever **STEPHAN'S EMERALD DOVE**!



Above: Female Stephan's Emerald Dove (Nick Thompson)

The following morning we returned to the site and staked out the surrounding forest, beach, vine scrub and mangroves. We searched and waited for two hours and were finally rewarded with a photo when Nick Thompson, who was sitting inside the mangroves had a female Stephan's Emerald Dove land on a branch in front of him. We not only had a first Australian record but we had a pair of them.



Above: Female Stephan's Emerald Dove (Nick Thompson)

That afternoon when the tide was high we boarded the dinghies and set off down the Boigu River to a beach on the other side of the island. The cruise down the river produced at least fifty **Whimbrel** with each one scrutinised and photographed in the hope of finding an Hudsonian Whimbrel. This time we were out of luck.



On the far side of the island Joe spotted a lone swiftlet approaching the dinghies and we soon had our next local wet season specialty, **UNIFORM SWIFTLET**.

Our luck continued on the beach with views of the local *reinwardt* sub species of **Orange-footed Scrubfowl**, a lone **Red-backed Button Quail** and for a lucky few an **ORIENTAL CUCKOO**. That afternoon we repositioned to Saibai Island.



Above: Oriental Cuckoo (R.Baxter)

Our first morning on Saibai was spent near the cemetery, where there are several exposed trees and perches for passing birds. During our morning we had several **Collared Imperial-pigeons**, **White-throated Needletail**, **Cicadabird**, **Dusky Honeyeater** and the Trans Fly resident grey variant **Torresian Imperial-pigeon**.



Above: The Trans Fly resident grey variant Torresian Imperial-pigeon. (R.Baxter)

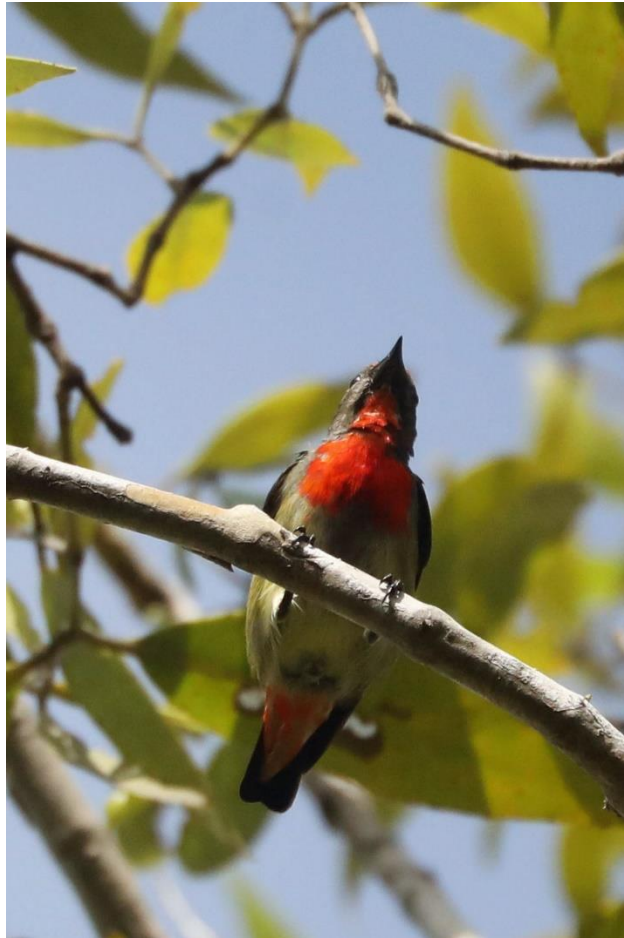


Above: Cicadabird (R.Baxter)

In addition to these we added several New Guinea sub species to our trip list, which included the **New Guinea Eclectus Parrot ssp *polychloros***, **Papuan Drongo ssp *carbonarius***, **Tawny-breasted Honeyeater ssp *saturation***, **Black Butcherbird ssp *alecto***, **Red-headed Honeyeater ssp *infuscata*** and **Orange-footed Scrubfowl ssp *reinwardt***.

Both Boigu and Saibai have 22 ssp that are elsewhere found only in PNG. These islands are just waiting for a keen taxonomist to come along and make a name for themselves!

Our main target that morning was Red-capped (Papuan) Flowerpecker. The flowerpecker prefers to stay in the coastal vine scrub at the back of the mangroves and after a short walk we found the location where I'd seen it in previous years and played the call. After a couple of minutes Mel spotted a diminutive **RED-CAPPED FLOWERPECKER** in the canopy. It was soon joined by a brightly coloured adult male as the two birds moved between trees above us. The group took some photos and we left the pair to continue to forage in the forest canopy.



Above: Red-capped (Papuan) Flowerpecker (Nick Thompson)

The next day was our last on Saibai and our main target was the elusive and much sought after Gurney's Eagle *Aquila gurneyi*. This species likes to patrol the northern coastline of tall mangrove forest and vine thicket, not going anywhere near the settled areas. It's here that the boat is at its best as we repositioned into the channel several kilometres along the coast and waited.

As we scanned the skies our first Uniform Swiftlet appeared cruising west above the tree line, then later on more swifts were spotted out the back of the boat. What first appeared to be 4-5 birds became 20-30, then 100+. We watched the flock approach and then spiral upwards near the boat before disappearing south across the island. We counted about 70 **UNIFORM SWIFTLETS** and 40 **Pacific Swifts**. An incredible sight over an Australian Island.

After lunch we continued our Gurney's watch, occasionally distracted by **Whistling Kites**, **Osprey** and immature **White-bellied Eagles**. Mid afternoon we spotted a large dark raptor flying at tree height near the boat and into the wind. Initially we didn't have good views but eventually it turned and banked in better light revealing itself as a cracking male **GURNEY'S EAGLE**.

It was our 97th species of the week and a great way to end our final day on the islands before heading for home.



Above: Gurney's Eagle (Nick Thompson)

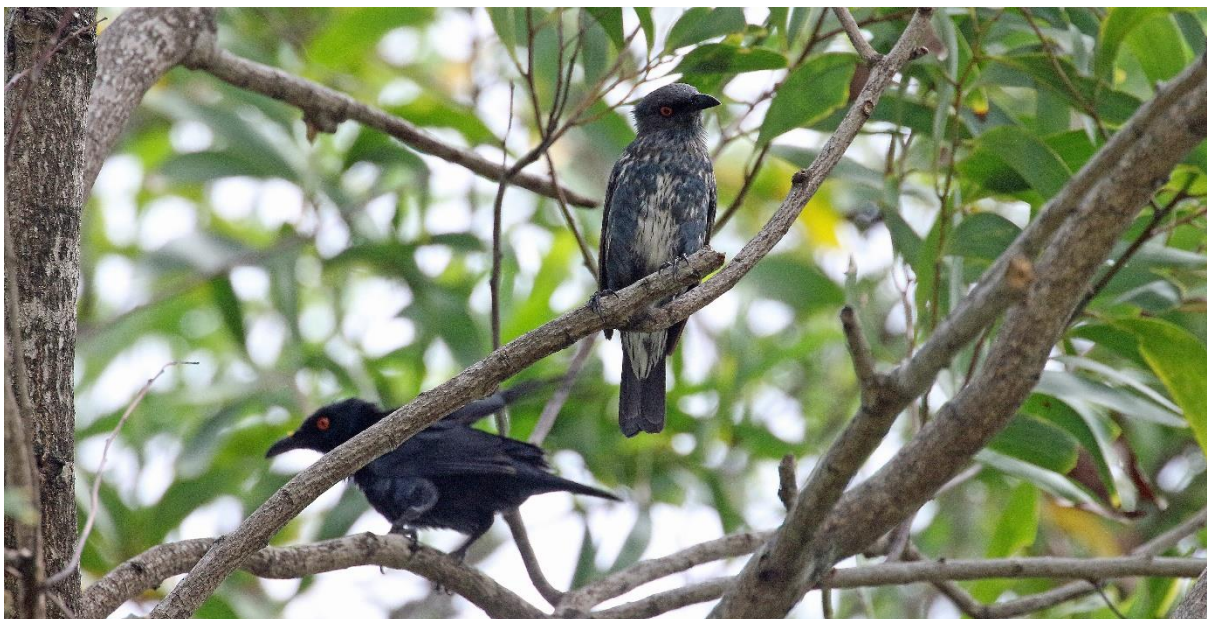


Above: Gurney's Eagle (Mel Mitchel)

Tour 2

After a slow trip north from Horn Island we arrived at Boigu late that night and at 6am went ashore in cool overcast conditions. Our first morning was productive with a nice suite of local species and sub species. As we disembarked and walked through the village **SINGING STARLING** was seen in poor light. Twenty minutes later we had two **COLLARED IMPERIAL-PIGEONS** perch in one of the emergent trees nearby allowing the group to get their first views and several photos.

After a short wait we were rewarded with a migratory **ORIENTAL CUCKOO** which was a new bird for some people on the trip. As we returned to the jetty we once again saw Singing Starling, this time on the overhead powerlines. A good end to our first morning on the islands.



Above: Singing Starling (Jeff Jones)

On our second day on Boigu our main target was the flowerpecker but it required a walk across the local creek, so we waited for low tide on the edge of the nearby forest and watched a steady stream of local identities stream past. These included a couple of New Guinea sub species such as Large-billed Gerygone ssp *brunneipectus* and even the New Guinea Willie Wagtail ssp *melaleuca* but the outstanding highlight came in a lone **UNIFORM SWIFTLET** that cruised slowly past us flying into a headwind.



Above: Uniform Swiftlet (R.Baxter)



Above: Red-capped Flowerpecker (R.Baxter)

When the tide dropped sufficiently, we walked into the forest and soon reached the flowerpecker spot. We played the call and within a few seconds there was movement in the canopy. A bit of enticing and we soon had a diminutive little male **RED-CAPPED FLOWERPECKER** on an exposed branch for the group to see and photograph. With our main target for the day in the bag we didn't hang around in the forest and departed quickly for a short but extremely productive session adjacent to the forest.

The bird of the trip so far arrived only minutes later when two **Torresian Crows** chased a mid-sized raptor out of the forest directly in front of us. The crows gave up their pursuit after the raptor dived into the nearby forest to escape the harassment. It was obviously a goshawk and the slaty grey back, dark orange front and no collar meant that our bird was Australia's second ever **VARIABLE GOSHAWK**. An incredible find and a new bird for the entire team.



Above: Variable Goshawk (Jeff Jones)



Above: Variable Goshawk (R.Baxter)

The following morning was spent at the Saibai Cemetery which is a good spot for local passerines as well as a couple of the local specials. **COLLARED IMPERIAL-PIGEONS** filed past fairly regularly, two **UNIFORM SWIFTLET** put in a brief appearance and even a **RED-CAPPED FLOWERPECKER** showed well for a while. As well as the above, **Green Oriole** ssp *muelleri*, **Dusky Honeyeater** ssp *fumata* and the local *theirfelderi* ssp of **Pheasant Coucal** were seen well, adding to our list of PNG subspecies.



Above: Collared Imperial-pigeons (R.Baxter)

We then spent the next two days exploring some of the creeks, rivers and channels around Saibai, always keeping an eye out for the much sort after but elusive Gurney's Eagle. Despite many hours scanning the skies the eagle failed to appear.



On one of the trips along a creek on the northern coastline we had a tiny green bird fly into a nearby tree. Only three of us saw it closely and I immediately called Pygmy Longbill but the bird very quickly departed and no photos were taken. We spent the next thirty minutes searching the area and returned again to the spot later that afternoon but we couldn't re-find it. I just didn't get a good enough view to confirm the sighting but there is nothing else it could have been. I've recorded it as 'unconfirmed' but we'll be looking much harder for this species in the future.

Late on the final afternoon we raised the anchor and started the long trip south to Little Tuesday Island we were landed early the next morning in search of our final target, Ashy-bellied (Pale) White-eye. It was low tide when we arrived and after a wet landing and a short walk through the shallows to the sandy beach we initially struggled to find any co-operative white-eyes but with perseverance we soon had a few **ASHY-BELLIED WHITE-EYE** showing in the beach side scrub. A nice end to a very enjoyable trip.



Above: Ashy-bellied White-eye (R.Baxter)



TOUR 3

Our journey north started under clear skies and with a flat glassy sea. The **ASHY-BELLIED WHITE-EYES** on Little Tuesday Island proved more co-operative with twenty actively feeding in a flowering beach-side tree. Also on the island were **Mangrove Golden Whistler**, **Red-headed Honeyeater**, **Noisy Pitta**, **Rose-crowned Fruit Dove** and **Spectacled Monarch**.



Above: Ashy-bellied White-eye (R.Baxter)

Boigu dawned fine, still and sunny for our first day on the island. Our day's target was Singing Starling, as Boigu is the only place in Australia this species can be seen. We walked through town in the pre-dawn light finding 2-3 **SINGING STARLING** in the village trees and then continued onto our stake-out location at the edge of town.



Above: Singing Starling (R.Baxter)

With calm conditions, birding was initially slow but as the morning progressed our bird list grew longer. The first highlight was a **COLLARED IMPERIAL-PIGEON** which rocketed past only allowing half the group any sort of view. It didn't matter as we soon had another two more co-operative birds fly by.

The next special bird came in the form of an **ORIENTAL CUCKOO**, which was initially elusive but progressively provided better views throughout the morning. It was a great start to the first day on the northern islands, which continued with a late afternoon river cruise on which those that missed **Collared Imperial-pigeons** that morning all had good views.

That afternoon we cruised the main Boigu River to the southern side of the island where we sat in the river mouth counting **Tree Martins** and **White-breasted Woodswallows**. Not long after, Damian spotted our first **UNIFORM SWIFTLET** of the tour and with the entire group scanning the skies we soon had five swiftlets over the river mouth which put on a brief show for the group.



Above: Uniform Swiftlet (R.Baxter)

On our final morning on Boigu Island our main target was the flowerpecker but instead we had a two hour swift-a-thon with a side order of flowerpecker. We arrived on the island at dawn and walked to my favourite stake-out spot, which visit after visit continues to deliver. Last tour it was Variable Goshawk, this time an incredible array of swifts, including one cracking mega.



Above: Papuan Spinetail (R.Baxter)

As we approached the spot, a quick scan of the sky revealed two **UNIFORM SWIFTLETS** circling above and providing closer views than yesterday. Not long after, we spotted a few **White-throated Needletail** heading east overhead in what were surprisingly calm conditions for swift sightings. After a pause of twenty minutes the day's highlight arrived low and slow over the trees in the form of a magnificent **PAPUAN SPINETAIL**, giving everyone outstanding views as it circled low overhead in the early morning light, a magical few minutes of birding.



Above: Papuan Spinetail (R.Baxter)

The action continued not long after with a wave of **Pacific Swifts** arriving from the west. Then in the middle of the Pacific Swifts we spotted a **HOUSE SWIFT**. Our group scanned the skies and we soon had at least three **House Swifts** amongst the flock which now had been joined by **Tree Martins** and **White-breasted Woodswallows**. It had been an incredible mornings birding and we hadn't found time to look for the flowerpecker yet!

With a couple of needletails still circling we decided to walk into the mangroves in search of the day's main target. After nearly twenty visits to the islands I now have a section of forest where our target can fairly easily be found and after a short walk and a five minute wait we had a delightful little **PAPUAN FLOWERPECKER** perched in the tree above us. What an incredible morning of birding.

The following day prior to heading to Saibai we cruised the Boigu River where we saw the best mammal of the summer. As we came through a strand of overhanging mangroves Damian noticed a small melomy sitting under a coconut in a tree over the river. It was a **Black-tailed Melomy** an endemic of nearby PNG and as far as we know the first ever Australian record of this species.



Above: Black-tailed Melomy AKA Black-tailed Mosaic-tailed Rat *Melomys rufescens* (D.Baxter)

That afternoon we repositioned to Saibai Island.



Above: Papuan Flowerpecker (R.Baxter)

The highlight of our two days on Saibai was the continuation of the incredible run of luck we were having with our main wet season target, Uniform Swiftlet. In addition to the swiftlets we also had four **HOUSE SWIFTS**, Peregrine Falcon, Little Kingfisher, migrating Rainbow Bee-eaters, Rufous-banded and Tawny-breasted Honeyeaters, as well as a few Papuan Drongo.



Above X 2: Uniform Swiftlet (R.Baxter)



Above: Mangrove Monitor (R.Baxter)

Tour 4

The final and longest tour of the season departed Horn Island and headed directly to Boigu Island. This tour was an additional two days to visit Ugar (Stephen's) Island. Ugar is an exploratory stop to visit a rainforest island in the wet season. We didn't know what we'd find but the location and vegetation made it somewhere worth checking.

Our two and half days on Boigu were highly successful with numerous sightings of the main wet season specialty we visit the islands in March to see ...**Uniform Swiftlet**.



Above: Uniform Swiftlet (R.Baxter)

We easily saw **SINGING STARLING** as we walked through town and then again in the trees on the edge of town. On nearby exposed canopy branches we had three mixed flocks of **Metallic** and **Singing Starlings**, while overhead flocks of **Torresian Imperial-pigeons** drifted north into the Trans Fly.



Above: Torresian Imperial-pigeons (R.Baxter)



Above: Collared Imperial-pigeon (R.Baxter)

After arriving at our first stop two **UNIFORM SWIFTLETS** were slowly circling above the forest and were soon joined by several migrating **Pacific Swifts** on their way back from Australia. Forest birds included **Tawny-breasted Honeyeater**, **Little Bronze Cuckoo**, **Cicadabird**, **Large-billed Gerygone** and **Shinning Flycatcher**.

We didn't have to wait long for the most spectacular of the local specialties to arrive, when a lone **COLLARED IMPERIAL-PIGEON** landed on a branch in front of the group, staying for a few minutes while we all snapped away with our cameras. Not long after, two **HOUSE SWIFT** flew in from the west giving us short views before departing north with two **Pacific Swifts** that came by.

Another trip highlight came when we boarded the dinghies and set off for a leisurely trip down two of the creeks along the Western Boigu coast. Not long after entering the waterway we had a flock of twelve whimbrel land in a dead tree in front of the boat giving Jen plenty of time to photograph an **HUDSONIAN WHIMBREL**, nicely showing its all dark back prior to landing.



Above and below: Hudsonian Whimbrel (Jenny Spry)



We had an excellent couple of days on Boigu with the undoubted highlight being the outstanding and prolonged views of numerous **Uniform Swiftlets**.



Above: Torresian Imperial-pigeon (R.Baxter)

An interesting find was made by Tom when he was searching some nearby forest and located a white-eye. Despite summoning the group and putting two hours into the search we failed to re-find the bird, which we all were hoping could have been New Guinea White-eye.



The crossing to Saibai took four hours and after arriving at the island we opted to once again do an afternoon river cruise. This time our target was the diminutive flowerpecker, which we'd only seen along the river once before in 2016. Our first two stops weren't successful but further down the river I spotted a tiny bird fly across the river and into nearby trees. We stopped, played the call and were rewarded with a lone **PAPUAN FLOWERPECKER** watching us from the top of a riverside mangrove. Happy with our afternoon success we spent the rest of the late afternoon drifting down the channel and enjoying a cold drink.



Above: Red-capped (Papuan) Flowerpecker (R.Baxter)

The remainder of our time on the island was all about raptors with four excellent species seen over three days. The fun began when we landed on the boat ramp and a small male **Brown Goshawk** of the pale Southern New Guinea sub species *dogwa* swooped down on a pair of lapwings. *Dogwa* is only found in Australia on Boigu and Saibai and the male is smaller than a coconut, which they often perch next to. Later that afternoon we found two females near the centre of the island.



Above: Brown Goshawk ssp dogwa (Rob Shore)

As we walked into the savanna interior of the island Rob spotted a raptor sitting in a nearby tree. It wasn't co-operative and kept moving out of sight, so a few of us walked down the road only to flush a **VARIABLE GOSHAWK** from the area, which quickly departed to the horizon, allowing only a quick ID shot.



Above: Variable Goshawk (J.Spry)

Our next sighting was a magnificent **LONG-TAILED HONEY-BUZZARD** which Graham spotted cruising along the treetops towards our boat. This was only the second time this elusive species has been recorded in Australia, with the first record on Dauan Island only 10km away in 2012 on one of these tours. It glided in low and slow, providing all on board fantastic extended looks of what is a rare and impressive, mega.



Above: Long-tailed Honey-buzzard (R.Baxter)



Above: Long-tailed Honey-buzzard (R.Baxter)

After enjoying our time with this spectacular species, we sat around relaxing on deck and some even opted to go down to their air-conditioned cabins for an afternoon nap. Forty-five minutes later the call went out, “**GURNEY’S EAGLE** 12 o’clock!!” and soaring in front of the boat was the day’s main target, a remarkable **GURNEY’S EAGLE**. For the next thirty minutes it soared on thermals back and forth across the remote channel on the far side of Saibai that we were anchored in. A cracking bird and one of the top 10 most sought after birds on the Australian list. A phenomenal hour!





Above X 3: Gurney's Eagle (R.Baxter)

We finished our final afternoon on Saibai with a lone perched **COLLARED IMPERIAL-PIGEON** which sat nicely in a tree not far from the boat. The following day was a travel day to Ugar AKA Stephen's Island.



Above: Collared Imperial-pigeon (R.Baxter)

After departing Saibai the rest of the trip was purely exploratory. I'd planned the additional days to visit Ugar which is a full day's travel east of Saibai. Ugar is only a small island but it has one feature that none of the other northern islands have.....rainforest! We may find some interesting birds or we may not. Either way it's worth a look.

We landed at dawn on an island only 800m across and mostly covered in tall rainforest. Within a few minutes those that needed to see **Ashy-bellied White-eye** had seen several and we all set to explore the island. We scoured the small island for a full day finding forty four species and some great habitat for vagrant PNG species but we failed to find any.



Above: Ugar coast (R.Baxter)

Our four trips were all highly successful and justified once again doing these trips by boat and in the wet season. We saw an outstanding list of rare, elusive, localized and stunning species, many of which we wouldn't have seen without the magnificent crew of Eclipse FNQ, Joe, Bianca, Sam and Emily who worked tirelessly to make our trips as comfortable and productive as possible.

I'd thank all those that came along for their teamwork, friendship and enthusiasm in making these such thoroughly rewarding tours.

We'll be running these tours again in 2022 but there is a chance I may be able to sneak an extra trip into the schedule in Feb 2021. Please contact Birding Tours Australia if you are interested in coming along. birdingtoursaust@gmail.com

Regards

Richard Baxter

Pictures



