

Torres Strait Trip Report Jan-Feb 2022

Birding Tours Australia

Trips 1-4

Richard Baxter



Trip 1: We all spent the night prior to the trip at the Gateway Motel on Horn Island. Qantas flies twice daily to Horn Island, which has the main airport servicing Thursday Island and the entire Torres Strait. After a relaxing afternoon around the pool and an early night, we were all well rested for our 7am departure to the jetty. After settling in on board Eclipse we made our way to Little Tuesday Island which is about an hour north of Thursday Island. We went ashore in good conditions but with rain approaching. After ten minutes most of the group had seen **ASHY-BELLIED WHITE-EYE** while the others continued their search, as the birds weren't being co-operative. As the rain approached those that had seen the bird returned to the boat to stay dry, while the rest of us endured a tropical downpour, eventually seeing our target after almost an hour of searching.

In addition to the white-eye we also saw Red-headed Myzomela (Honeyeater) *Myzomela erythrocephala*, Mangrove Golden Whistler (Black-tailed Whistler) *Pachycephala melanura robusta*, Brown Honeyeater *Lichmera indistincta ocularis*, White-breasted Woodswallow, Olive-backed Sunbird *Nectarinia jugularis frenata*, a.k.a. *Cinnyris jugularis frenatus*, Spectacled Monarch *Symposiachrus trivirgatus albiventris* as well as Black-naped Tern *Sterna sumatrana sumatrana* and Common Tern *hirundo longipennis*. Also present was Beach Stone-curlew and Eurasian Whimbrel as a Noisy Pitta called from the interior.



Our first morning on Boigu was spent on the rivers and along the coastline. As we set out very early we didn't have to wait long for our first vagrant of the trip. In the pre-dawn light four possible **House Swifts** cruised overhead with several Pacific Swifts, all on their way to PNG. Not long after, we had the first of over ten **COLLARED IMPERIAL PIGEONS** *Ducula mullerii mullerii* seen that morning, which included a couple of perched views.



Above: Collared Imperial-pigeon (Richard Baxter)

Further along the creeks we flushed five **ORIENTAL CUCKOO** *Cuculus optatus* which continued to flush ahead of the boat for 400m, occasionally landing for very brief views.

In addition to birding, we were also on the lookout for reptiles and mammals as we had Tim, Jake and Hewin from the Australian Reptile Park on board as well Mark Sanders. It didn't take long for Tim to find a Littoral Whip-tailed Skink resting on a log on one of the Boigu outer islands.



Above: Littoral Whip-tailed Skink (*Amoia atrocosta*) Richard Baxter

The following two mornings were spent on Boigu where once again **SINGING STARLING** *Aplonis cantoroides* was easily found around town.

We spent a few hours at my favourite stake-out spot which quickly produced passing **UNIFORM SWIFTLETS** *Aerodramus vanikorensis yorki*, which are a Wet Season specialty visiting from the nearby New Guinea lowlands. While at the site we also had good views of Spangled Drongo *Dicrurus bracteatus carbonarius*, the sedentary Papuan subspecies of Spangled Drongo, Large-billed Gerygone *Gerygone magnirostris brunneipectus*, Varied Triller, Cicadabird *Edolisoma tenuirostre*, possibly *ssp. aruense*, Tawny-breasted Honeyeater and another Oriental Cuckoo. While we birded, the others searched for the elusive and much sort after Emerald Monitor.



Above: Uniform Swiftlet and Oriental Cuckoo (Richard Baxter)

Near my favourite 'stake-out' spot on Boigu is an area of vine thicket at the back of the mangroves and with the tide low we ventured into the forest in search of the diminutive local flowerpecker. After a short search we heard a bird in the canopy and fortunately it flew onto an exposed branch for all to see and just long enough for a few photos to be taken. After a short wait we had extended views of a gorgeous male **RED-CAPPED (PAPUAN) FLOWERPECKER** *Dicaeum geelvinkianum albobunctatum* in good light as it foraged in the sub canopy.

Also present was an immature Black-faced Monarch, Red-headed Honeyeater, *Megapodius reinwardt reinwardt*, the Papuan subspecies of Orange-footed Scrubfowl and a flyover of *Eclectus roratus polychloros* the Papuan subspecies of Eclectus Parrot. Frustratingly, as we were packing up our gear and all looking the other way, a dark green fruit dove flew overhead and was not seen well enough to ID.



Red-capped (Papuan) Flowerpecker (Richard Baxter)

On our final afternoon on Boigu we travelled down two small creeks at the back of town and after days of searching Jake spotted an **Emerald Monitor** *Varanus prasinus* on the trunk of a tall mangrove. We quickly

stopped and after some expert manoeuvring by our decky Ricky, hundreds of photos were taken of what has to be one of Australia's most stunning reptiles.



Above: Emerald Monitor (Richard Baxter) and Zircon Flutterer (Nikolas Haass)

That afternoon we repositioned to Saibai where we birded a local creek finding Black Bittern *Ixobrychus flavicollis australis*, Shining Flycatcher, Brown-backed H/E and Tawny-breasted H/E *Xanthotis flaviventer saturator*. On the return trip we stopped for fifteen minutes to watch a stunning Little Kingfisher *Ceyx pusillus pusillus* fishing from a long mangrove root.



Above: Drying boots (Nikolas Haass) and Juv Black Bittern (R.Baxter)



Above: There's a Emerald Monitor up there ! (Tim Faulkner)

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The following morning we staked out the cemetery for three hours finding Papuan Drongo, Dusky H/E, Black Butcherbird *Melloria quoyi alecto*, Pheasant Coucal *Centropus phasianinus thierfelderi* as well as several migrating Pacific Swifts *Apus pacificus* and a good haul of Collared Imperial Pigeons.



Above: Looking for the flowerpecker (Judy Christie) and Ant Plants *Myrmecodia platytyrea antoinii* and *Hydnophytum moseleyanum* (Nikolas Haass)

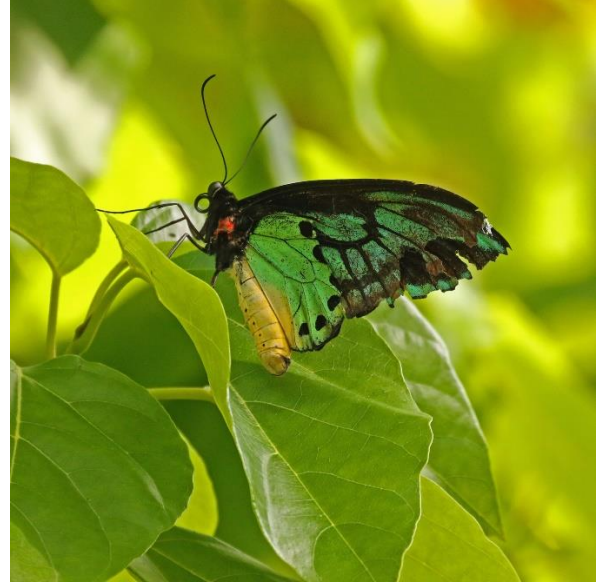
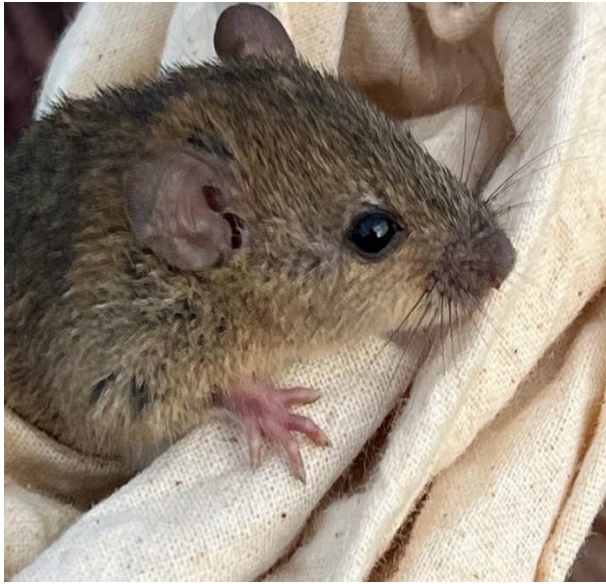
On the return trip we watched two Whistling Kites and a White-bellied Sea-eagle harass a group of flying fox resting in the tall mangroves. During the day discussion continued as to the ID of the flying foxes and later that afternoon Tim, Nikolas, Mark and Jake fought their way through the deep mangrove mud and photographed Australia's first ever GREAT FLYING FOX *Pteropus neohibernicus*, a species previously only known from nearby PNG and one of the largest and heaviest bats in the World. It was celebrations all round and the second new mammal we've discovered for Australia on these trips to Boigu and Saibai.



Above: Australia's first ever Great Flying Fox and boat trip (Tim Faulkner)

On our final morning we landed on Saibai at the crack of dawn and soon added the local ssp of Pheasant Coucal *Centropus phasianinus thierfelderi* to the trip list. We scanned the mudflats finding Marsh Sandpiper, Lesser and Greater Sand-Plover, Red-necked Stint, Sharp-tailed Sandpiper and Pacific Golden Plover. The nearby bushes contained Rufous-banded Honeyeaters and the open grasslands were thick with Golden-headed Cisticolas, while the small local sub species of Brown Goshawk *Accipiter fasciatus dogwa* patrolled the coastline and a colony of Large-eared Flying Foxes *Pteropus macrotis* were noisy in the distance.

The final finds of the trip were made by the guys looking for snakes near the garbage tip when they located a Bar-lipped Sheen Skink *Eugongylus rufescens* and a Papuan Grassland Melomy, which was only the second record of the melomy for Australia, although the taxonomic relationship of the Northern Torres Strait mosaic-tailed rats is currently unresolved and our find may yet be an undescribed species.



Above: Mangrove Golden Whistler (Richard Baxter)

Trip 2:

Trip two started on a calm tropical morning and we were soon on our way to Little Tuesday Island for views of **ASHY-BELLIED WHITE-EYE**. Both the White-eye and the weather were far more co-operative this time and several birds were easily seen at the back of the beach. While we photographed the white-eyes, a Beach Stone-

curlew flew along the beach, Red-headed Honeyeaters squabbled in the trees and a Mangrove Golden Whistler performed well for those with cameras.



Above: Ashy-bellied White-eye (Richard Baxter)



Above: Beach Stone-curlew (Richard Baxter)

On our second day we commenced the search for the five remaining Northern Torres Strait and Wet Season specialties. Which are:

1. Collared Imperial Pigeon
2. Uniform Swiftlet
3. Ashy-bellied White-eye
4. Singing Starling
5. Red-capped (Papuan) Flowerpecker
6. Coconut Lorikeet

Of course while we search for the local specialties, we're also on the lookout for visitors from nearby PNG such as Gurney's Eagle, Long-tailed Buzzard, Papuan Spinetail and a long list of imperial pigeons and doves.

The day's main target was the pigeon and it only took us 30 minutes to see it. The first views were a quick fly past but as we motored along the creeks on the far side of the island we began to see more birds and in better light. At the end of the day we returned to Eclipse with twenty **COLLARED IMPERIAL-PIGEONS** recorded. These Northern Torres Strait islands are the only locations in Australia where Collared Imperial-pigeon are found. A very successful first day, which also included a bonus **ORIENTAL CUCKOO**.



Above: Collared Imperial-Pigeon (Richard Baxter)



Above: Collared Imperial-pigeon (Paul Gatenby) and On the river (Joy Tansey)

The following day we arrived on Boigu at 5.30am and walked to our stake-out site with three targets on our list. The first to fall was the common lowland swiftlet on nearby Southern New Guinea, **UNIFORM SWIFTLET**. This species is only ever seen on Boigu and Saibai in the Wet Season and although plain grey in colour, its highly sort after and difficult to see.

Usually, to search for the swiftlets we look for flocks of more the common swifts and hope there are a couple amongst them but this time we were rewarded with a lone **UNIFORM SWIFTLET** passing overhead slowly and then circling around us. An hour later perhaps the same bird revisited us.



Above: Uniform Swiftlet (Richard Baxter)

There were only three people on this tour that had not done the trip in previous years, so at 8.30am the four of us set off into the vine forest in search of the flowerpecker. We'd only walked a short distance and heard a bird calling but after 20min of searching we couldn't locate it. We ventured further into the forest and after a short wait located three **RED-CAPPED (PAPUAN) FLOWERPECKERS** in the small trees at the back of the mangroves. As we photographed a nice adult male another two birds joined the party and in total we had five flowerpeckers in close proximity. To cap the walk off, Paul spotted an Emerald Monitor lazing on a branch above where we were standing. While we were in the forest the trio who stayed behind had views of a fly-over **VARIABLE GOSHAWK**. An exciting find for all but one of the group, who had seen this species at the same location in 2020.



Above: Red-capped Flowerpecker (Richard Baxter)

Our next target is only found in Australia around the town on Boigu Island and as we returned to the jetty we located a **SINGING STARLING** sitting in a palm tree adjacent to the jetty.



Above: Singing Starling (Richard Baxter)



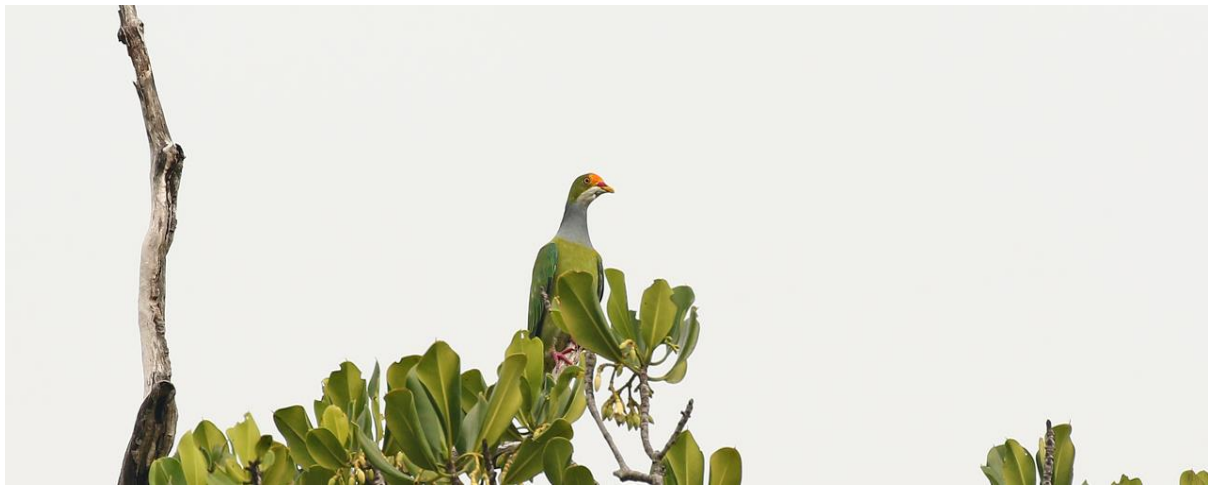
That afternoon we loaded the eskies with cold drinks and headed off for a nice afternoon cruise along the two nearby Boigu creeks and the main channel. During the afternoon we watched large numbers of Torresian Imperial-pigeons *Ducula spilorrhoa* moving North back to PNG, as well as a couple of White-throated Needletails *Hirundapus caudacutus* and along the creek several of the local Papuan subspecies of Bar-shouldered Dove *Geopelia humeralis gregalis*. After another day we moved to Saibai where we had an exciting two and a half days.



Above: Granite boulders on Dauan Island (Mel Mitchell)

On the way to Saibai we stopped for a quick afternoon cruise along the coast of Dauan Island. We weren't able to land due to Covid restrictions but it was a pleasant afternoon cruise where we saw some nice looking habitat that we'll attempt to explore on our next visit in 2024. The fun began on Saibai on the first morning when had two mega doves in the Cemetery. During the morning stakeout a Stephan's Dove was heard calling in the nearby forest. Its call is more rapid than the also present Pacific Emerald Dove and as long as you get good views they can be separated in flight due to the white on the forehead and colour of the rump. As we moved into the area a **STEPHAN'S DOVE** *Chalcophaps stephani* flew diagonally across in front of us and fortunately it was the male with the white forehead clearly visible in flight.

Not long after, Christy spotted a fruit dove dart across above us and land at the top of a nearby tree. We all spun around to see a gorgeous **ORANGE-FRONTED FRUIT DOVE** *Ptilinopus aurantiifrons* perched high on one of the emergent trees. Much to our delight it stayed for five minutes in good light. This was Australia's second record of this species after our sighting on Boigu in 2016. The 2016 sighting was in dull pre-dawn light, so it was nice to see this species at its best.



Orange-fronted Fruit-dove (Richard Baxter)

Our second morning on Saibai was all about lorikeets. Initially we had two screeching birds fly over, then after a short break they began to fly past in two's and three's until by the time we were ready to leave, we had recorded 22 **COCONUT LORIKEETS**.



Above: Coconut Lorikeets (Richard Baxter)

That morning also began the most frustrating journey of the season. We explored the monsoon forest and reaching the creek heard an unusual pigeon call from the other side of the creek. We soon identified it as the difficult to see Purple-tailed Imperial-pigeon and attempted to tempt it across to our side of the creek using play back but it refused to budge. It would have to wait until trip 3. After a late afternoon dinghy trip along the coast we returned to Eclipse for yet another wonderful dinner prepared by our chef Kaz.



Above: Mangrove Monitor (Paul Gatenby) and Robust Rainbow Skink (Melissa Bruton)



TRIP 3

With a delayed start from Horn Island we decided to skip Little Tuesday Island and run straight to Boigu, with a rescheduled stop for the white-eye on the final day.

Our first morning on Boigu was a great success with three of our main targets nailed before 10am. The first sighting was a very co-operative **COLLARED IMPERIAL PIGEON** which flew across the front of us, showing nicely in the early morning light and then landing for a barrage of photographs to be taken. Also seen were Black Bittern, Large-tailed Nightjar, Northern Fantail, Olive-backed Sunbird, Little Bronze, Brush and Oriental Cuckoo as well as Varied Honeyeater and White-winged Triller.



Above: Red-capped Flowerpecker (Roksana Boreli), Boat trip (David Harper) Collared IMP (Roksana Boreli)

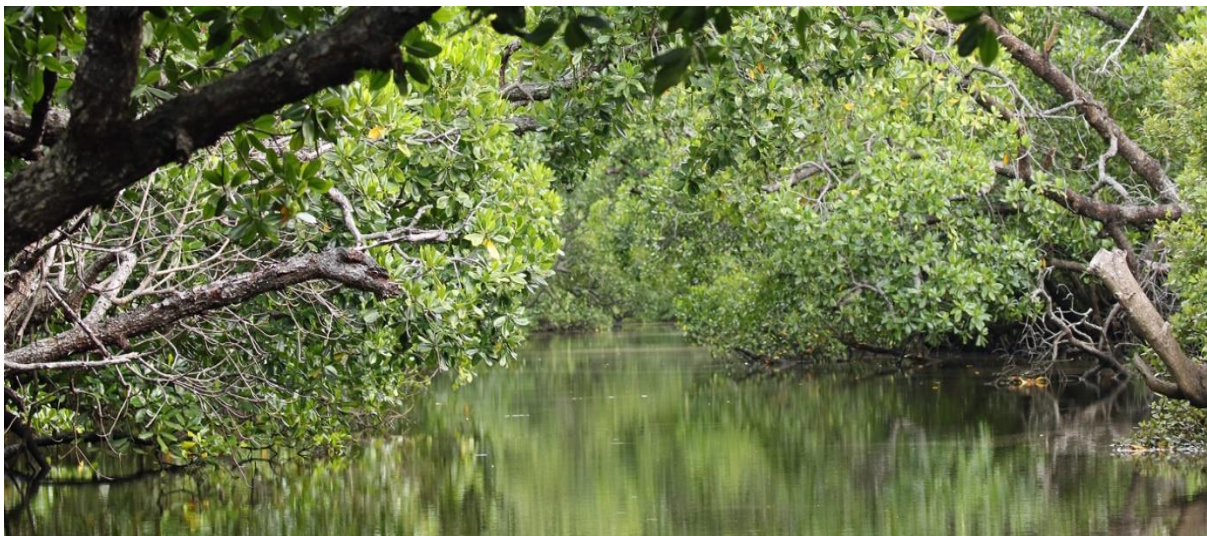
*****Next Tours to Boigu & Saibai will be Feb-March 2024 *****

Next we walked into the forest and after a short wait we had a nice adult male **RED-CAPPED (PAPUAN) FLOWERPECKER** visit the dead branches above the mangroves. It was soon joined by a female and after a short celebration we returned to town finding three **SINGING STARLING** in an oceanside tree.



Above: Singing Starling (Richard Baxter)

That afternoon we filled the esky with cold drinks and ice and set off down the island's main river finding White-breasted Woodswallow, numerous Whimbrel, Striated Heron *Butorides striata littleri/flyensis*, both Sacred and Little Kingfisher, Black Bittern, Varied Triller *Lalage leucomela yorki* and several Torresian Imperial-pigeons returning north to PNG.



The next morning we decided to stake out the end of the runway in the hope of seeing something different. It was a dark overcast and windy morning which focused our attention on possible swifts and swiftlets. We found 128 Torresian Imperial-pigeons, Papuan Drongo, three Cicadabird, two Red-headed H/E and eight Tree Sparrows *Passer montanus*, possibly *ssp. malaccensis* early on. As the morning progressed a few Pacific Swifts appeared in the distance and we were all on the lookout for one of their smaller relatives. We didn't have to wait long until the first of five **UNIFORM SWIFTLETS** appeared in the distance. Fortunately, they hung around for twenty minutes but unfortunately never soared overhead.

Not long after, a fruit dove darted across the runway and Bill was positioned in the right spot to get binocular views of a darting **ORANGE-FRONTED FRUIT DOVE**. Most of the group only saw a blur but that would soon be rectified.



Above: Orange-fronted Fruit-dove (Richard Baxter)

That afternoon we decided to reposition to Saibai a day earlier than usual.

Our first day on Saibai was a raging success with three spectacular sightings. After an hour and a half at the cemetery a green fruit dove darted over, followed by another. The next fruit dove crossed back in forth in front of us allowing some photos and extended views. Thirty minutes later two **ORANGE-FRONTED FRUIT-DOVES** perched in a tall tree and we quickly had good scope views and many photos were taken. By the end of the morning we had seen NINE Orange-fronted Fruit Doves and to put that into perspective, prior to last fortnight there had only been two sightings EVER in Australia.



Above: Orange-fronted Fruit Dove (Roksana Boreli)

As we birded the area an emerald dove was seen but couldn't be identified. A short time later a pair of **STEPHAN'S EMERALD DOVES** flew through the cemetery and were seen by four of the group and this sighting was followed by another fly past but this time it was a more common Pacific Emerald Dove.

We returned to the far side of Saibai in time for the late morning thermals and commenced 'Gurney's watch' from the channel separating Kamaug Island from Saibai. After two hours of peering into the sky I spotted a large black eagle cruising along the northern coastline of the island and yelled, " **GURNEY'S EAGLE** at 4 o'clock", then seconds later Bill called a second bird nearby. Over the next fifteen minutes we all watched the two magnificent Gurney's Eagles soar adjacent to the boat before departing for PNG.



Above: Gurney's Eagles (Richard Baxter) and Roksana Boreli



Above: On the river (Sandra Harding) and (Richard Baxter)

The next two mornings were spent at the Saibai Cemetery where we would eventually see four passing **COCONUT LORIKEETS** but unfortunately we only had distant views. As we waited for the screech of approaching parrots, we occupied ourselves with listening for Stephan's Doves in the monsoon vine forest but all we heard was the slower call of Pacific Emerald Dove, which is also present. Over the following two mornings a couple of people on the group had short views of fly-over Stephan's but the majority of sightings were of Pacific Emerald Dove.

Also present at the scene were Dusky Honeyeater (*Myzomela*) *Myzomela obscura fumata*, Little Bronze-Cuckoo *Chrysococcyx minutillus*, and the Papuan ssp of Willie Wagtail *Rhipidura leucophrys melaleuca*.



Above: Coconut Lorikeets (Richard Baxter)

On the second morning several of us walked to the spot where we had heard a possible Purple-tailed Imperial Pigeon the week before. This time I was armed with a much better series of calls to use for playback to lure it from across the creek. Having said that, the chances of an imperial pigeon sitting in the same tree seven days later was nearly zero.

As we approached the creek I could hear the call coming from the same tree as last week.....unbelievable! We spread out and I played the call and a pigeon flew from the tree across in front of a few of us and into a nearby strand of large trees. It called for another couple of minutes and then went quiet and then it was gone. Our brief view was nothing more than a silhouette.

That afternoon we were anchored at Gurney's Corner and were treated to 23 passing **COCONUT LORIKEETS** over a two hour period. As we scanned the tree tops and listened for approaching lorikeets a large brown raptor briefly popped up above the tree line and quickly disappeared from view. We didn't know what it was, so half the group jumped in a zodiac and raced up the channel to try and get ahead of the bird to confirm the ID, while the rest kept lookout from the top deck. We had both bases covered and before long an immature **GURNEY'S EAGLE** came back into view for those that stayed on the boat. It was great to see an immature of this species and probably the first immature bird ever seen in Australia. Great news for the future.



Above: Gurney's Eagle (David Harper)

On our final morning we anchored in the lee of Tuesday Island and with the wind blowing directly onto the landing beach we decided to zodiac along the sheltered side of the island for the white-eye. It only took a couple of minutes to see the first of several **ASHY-BELLIED WHITE-EYES** but we stayed for another thirty minutes to secure a few photographs before making our way onto Thursday Island to disembark. Like the two previous trips we finished with 80-90 species seen during the week.



Above: Ashy-bellied White-eye (Richard Baxter)



TRIP 4

On the final trip we again decided to skip the Southern Islands and head straight to Boigu. We arrived at Boigu late on the first day and the following morning on an overcast and windy morning we set off from Eclipse at 5.30am with the hope of seeing swiftlets after a few days of calm weather. We arrived on Boigu and within half an hour had six **UNIFORM SWIFTLETS** circling directly above us, in company with a few Pacific Swifts. With our Wet Season target nailed we birded the forest edge recording Shinning Flycatcher, Tawny-breasted H/E as well as two Great-billed Heron, before a lone **COLLARED IMPERIAL PIGEON** darted across the tree tops. The bird was only seen by half the group but an hour later two birds cruised past our location providing nice looks and photographic opportunities.



Above: Collared Imperial-pigeon (Richard Baxter)



Above: Shining Flycatcher (Richard Baxter) and Tree Sparrow (Charuka Abhayawickrama)

After three hours we walked along the runway finding a snipe which was flushed into the nearby wetlands by a plane landing before we could identify it. Apart from that the only other bird of note on the runway was Black-tailed Godwit.

Only minutes later two **SINGING STARLING** perched on a nearby fence post and these were seen by all but one of the group, which was rectified twenty minutes later when the starling perched in a palm tree near the cemetery.



Above: Singing Starling (Richard Baxter)

The following morning on Boigu we witnessed the spectacle of 127 **UNIFORM SWIFTLETS** circling overhead for at least thirty minutes. Also present were four Torresian Crows *Corvus orru orru*, Northern Fantail *Rhipidura isura gularis*, Pied Heron *Egretta picata*, as well as the Papuan sub-species of Leaden Flycatcher *Myiagra rubecula papuana*.



With **Uniform Swiftlet**, **Collared Imperial-pigeon** and **Singing Starling** seen and the tides not being conducive for a walk into the flowerpecker site, we decided to move to Saibai and look for the flowerpecker there. After a long lunch on board Eclipse expertly prepared by our on-board chef Richard (Ricky), we headed off over the horizon to Saibai and had a relaxing afternoon on board.



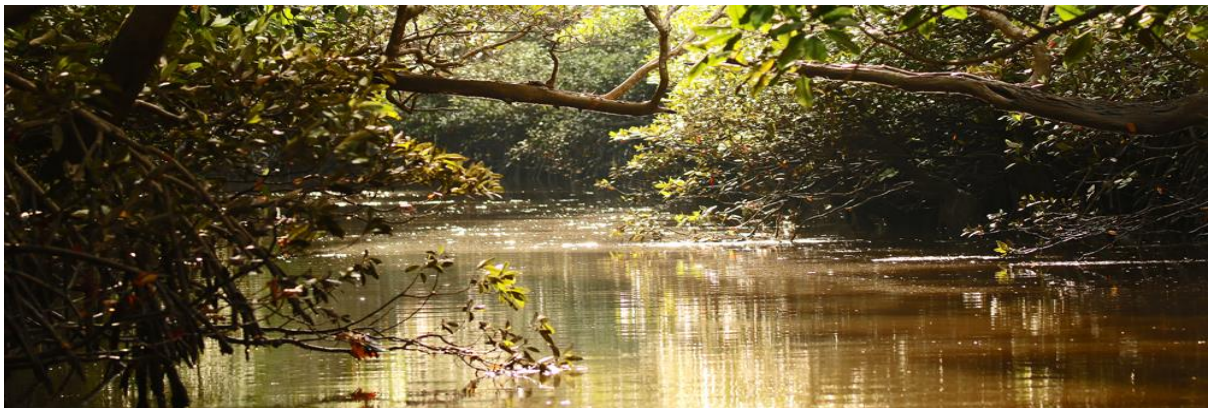
Above: Uniform Swiftlet (Richard Baxter)

Our main target on Saibai was the flowerpecker and on the first morning we walked to the cemetery and began our search. On the previous tour the flowerpecker flew in around 7.30am and hung around in the centre of the cemetery, which was the same area I saw the original Papuan Flowerpecker that we twitched in 2002.

At 8am Charuka called to the rest of the group that he had the flowerpecker. We all moved to his location and there was a **RED-CAPPED FLOWERPECKER** sitting on an exposed branch for all to see. The bird moved between two trees and each time landed on an exposed branch giving everyone clear and prolonged views for twenty minutes. It was one of the best sightings of the flowerpecker that we have ever had.



Above: Papuan Flowerpecker and Large-billed Gerygone (R.Baxter)



There are two creeks on Saibai that branch off the main channel and we spent a rewarding few hours slowly motoring along dodging the occasional low branch and submerged log. Along the creeks we saw Little Kingfisher, Tawny-breasted Honeyeater, Black Bittern, Brown-backed Honeyeater, Large-billed Gerygone, Black Bittern, Shinning Flycatcher and Black-faced Monarch.



We cruised the main channel and did a long afternoon exploratory trip to the far end of the island where we saw more Collared Imperial-pigeons, Uniform Swiftlets, Whistling Kite, Raja Shelduck, Little Tern, Pacific Swifts and Spangled (Papuan) Drongo.



Above: Rufous-banded Honeyeater and Black Bittern (Charuka Abhayawickrama)

After our time had ended on Saibai we moved to Little Tuesday Island for our final bird of the trip. It was good conditions to see **ASHY-BELLIED WHITE-EYE** and we didn't have to wait long before the entire group had seen 2-3 birds. With the birds seen we spread out to see what else we could find on the small island while the photographers worked on obtaining better photos.

As the white-eyes darted around us a beautiful Red-headed Honeyeater showed well and a pair of Mangrove Golden Whistlers performed for the cameras, while the entire time a Noisy Pitt called in the background.



Above: Mangrove Golden Whistler (Charuka Abhayawickrama) and lunch on Eclipse (Nigel Hartley)





Above: Ashy-bellied White-eye (Richard Baxter)



A special thankyou to all that took part on the trips this year. There were many enjoyable birding sessions and fun times had by all. A special thanks to the authorities on both islands as well as the island Councillors and PBC Chairs. Also thank you to Tim Faulkner, Nikolas Haass, Melissa Bruton and Nigel Hartley for their notes on birds, reptiles, mammals etc *species and ssp*. The crew of Eclipse (Joe, Richard, Kaz and Lachie) were once again magnificent and without who's efforts, these trips would be impossible to do.

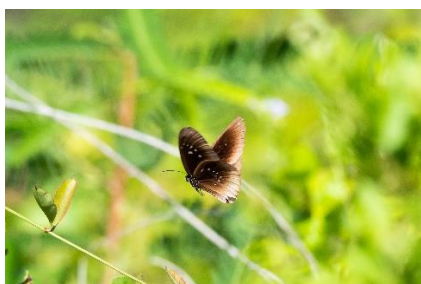
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Above: Euploeoe Alcathe and Swamp Tiger (Nigel Hartley)