

## Birding Tours Australia

# Christmas Cocos birding tours

**Nov-Dec-Jan 2022-23**

## Trip Report

Guide: Richard Baxter



### **Top dozen birds seen.**

- 1. Amur Stonechat**
- 2. Common Cuckoo**
- 3. Von Schrenck's Bittern**
- 4. Purple Heron**
- 5. Northern Boobook**
- 6. Brown Shrike**
- 7. Common Kingfisher**
- 8. Chinese & Japanese Sparrowhawks**
- 9. Red-throated Pipit**
- 10. Watercock**
- 11. Rosy Starling**
- 12. Yellow-breasted Bunting**

The November 2022 trip was the first of our four tours to the islands over the 2022-23 Summer and as is usual for November, some early arriving migrants had already showed up, while others arrived during our stay. Of course, the Island's local specialties and breeding endemics were all present and ready to put on a good show for our group, while we navigated our way through thousands of migrating Red Crabs on their way to the coast for their annual spawning, which we were lucky to witness early one morning.

After picking up our hire cars we made a quick dash to the supermarket just before closing time to pick up a few supplies and relaxed prior to dinner. On the way to dinner we stopped off at Lynda's

house and had cracking views of a **Christmas Boobook** in her front yard, prior to finishing the day at a local restaurant a short walk from our accommodation.



Above: Christmas Boobook (Mark Stanley)

The plan for our first full day was to target the Malayan Night Heron which had been seen the week previously on the tracks near Grant's Well, as well as Java Sparrow. While focusing on these two difficult targets, we'd see many of the local endemics.

We set off early to my **Java Sparrow** location and quickly had several birds along with **Eurasian Tree Sparrow**, **Island Thrush**, **Christmas Island White-eye** and **Christmas Island Imperial Pigeon**. The tracks through the rainforest were all closed due to the Red Crab migration, so we set off on foot and after a 40min walk through spectacular forest, with the help of Lynda and Brett, came across our target a fairly co-operative **MALAYAN NIGHT HERON**, which allowed us to approach closer for some nice photos.

Below: Malayan Night Heron (Mark Stanley)



Our next morning started with a co-operative **EASTERN YELLOW WAGTAIL** on the school oval and a somewhat elusive **Oriental Pratincole** along the coast that progressively showed itself in between flights out to sea.

While searching the coastline for the pratincole we had good views of **Christmas Frigatebird**, **Great Frigatebird**, **White-tailed Tropicbird** as well as both **Brown** and **Red-footed Booby**.

We visited Territory Day Park for a photography session, just before the rain clouds descended and the rain commenced, which gave us an opportunity to explore some of the island's tracks and trails.



Above: Eastern Yellow Wagtail (Mark Stanley)



Above: Island Thrush (Richard Baxter)

The following morning started with an astonishing surprise. We departed our accommodation and after driving only 30m flushed a **VON SCHRENCK'S BITTERN** off the lawn adjacent to the motel. Mind blowing that one of the World's most difficult to see species and one of the most highly desired birds on the Australian list just stood in the middle of the lawn and performed perfectly for us, allowing many photos to be taken before flying into the forest, never to be seen again.



Above: Von Schrenck's Bittern (Maggie Overend)



Above: Robber (Coconut) Crab (Carole-Anne Fooks)

Once the bittern had vanished into the undergrowth we split up into groups and walked the coastline. The group that had walked around the point had flushed a possible Grey Wagtail and several of us rushed to the site but despite an hour of searching and waiting it did not return. Despite missing the

wagtail a lone **BARN SWALLOW** was found flying laps of the foreshore at Flying Fish Cove, which was a new bird for a couple of people on the trip. With the cove closing for the up coming Red Crab spawning, we decided to adjourn our wagtail search for a couple of days.

We continued to explore the island finding **Red-tailed Tropicbird**, **Common Emerald Dove** and **Christmas Island Swiftlet**. Walking through a grassy area we flushed two **PIN-TAILED SNIPE**, before heading to South Point Temple for dinner at a local Chinese festival.



Above: Red-footed booby (Carole-Anne Fooks)



Above: Pin-tailed Snipe (Mark Stanley)

Not everyone saw the snipe the previous afternoon, so the following day we focused on several areas of marshy grassland and by the end of the day everyone had seen four **Pin-tailed Snipe**.

The following day half the group visited The Dales and didn't connect with any vagrants but did experience thousands of Red Crabs making their way into the centre of the island, as well as lots of Robber (Coconut) Crabs and Blue Crabs.

While the others explored The Dales, the rest of us visited a couple of the local hotspots closer to town. Mid-morning we stopped by an area where the previous two day's of rain had produced several large pools of water. Soon after stopping we had a **Wood Sandpiper** and an **Eastern Yellow Wagtail** amongst the rocks. As we approached, one wagtail soon became five and while I was scanning the area for wagtails I noticed another bird moving with them. A couple of seconds later it moved into the clear and revealed itself as a very unexpected and obliging **RED-THROATED PIPIT!**



Above: Red-throated Pipit (Richard Baxter)

Once we'd all seen it and taken plenty of photos, two of us stayed with the bird while I drove across the island to The Dales and located the others. After some great team work we all had great views of what was the first record of this species on Christmas Island since 1994.

The following day started at 4am for the annual Red Crab spawning. In the pre-dawn darkness we stood on the beach and watched thousands of Red Crabs do their thing in the surf, before commencing their long journey back into the forest.



Above: The Red Crab spawning and Red Crabs at The Dales (R.Baxter)

Another search for Grey Wagtail was uneventful, as were another two locations we tried later in the day. Despite there being two or three sightings last fortnight, it appeared they had all moved on.

Our final full day on the island would prove to be spectacular, with two high quality birds seen. We split up again and while we explored the North Eastern side of the island, the other team headed to the North Western end, where after an hour walk, stopped to scan an open area and immediately saw a small bird fly across the path that was clearly not one of the Christmas Island residents.

Fortunately, it was co-operative and before long some good photos were taken of a stonking little **AMUR STONECHAT**. It was Australia's second record of a stonechat and they were the first birders to ever see this species in Australia. A true crippler.



Above: Amur Stonechat (Brett Whitfield)



(Above: Amur Stonechat (Charuka Abhayawickrama)

The group managed to get a message to the rest of us and we set off across the island to their location. Upon arrival we couldn't find the stonechat but after a worrying thirty minutes, the bird was spotted not far from where it was initially seen and all was good. Absolutely exhilarated we walked back to the cars and returned to our accommodation a very happy group of birders.

We were having a late lunch when we received news of a possible flycatcher about 20min from our accommodation. A quick drive to the site and we were all soon looking at a little **DARK-SIDED FLYCATCHER**, which sat nicely for the photographers in the group. What an incredible day. The stonechat and the flycatcher both made this perhaps the most unforgettable day of the entire Summer.



Above: Dark-sided Flycatcher (Mark Stanley)

The following day it was time to fly to Cocos for the second week of the trip.

On our first morning we quickly saw **Green Junglefowl** and had much better views of **White-breasted Waterhen**, then we had on Christmas Island. A brief stop at the rubbish dump produced **Common Greenshank**, **Grey-tailed Tattler** and **COMMON REDSHANK** before they flushed deeper into the inner lagoon. Further along the lagoon edge we scoped the long staying **PURPLE HERON** which had now swapped its diet from grasshoppers to fish and was much harder to see on the far side of the lagoon



Above: West Island Inner Lagoon (Maggie Overend)

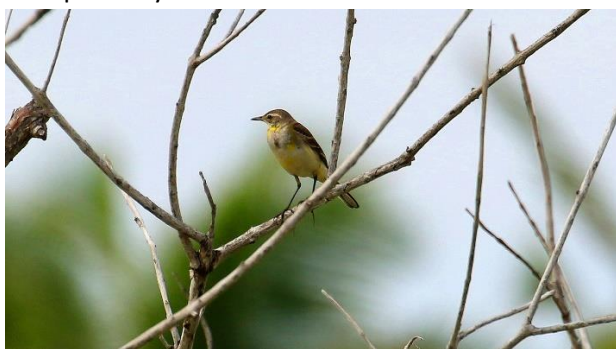


Above: Group photo Home Island

We added **Oriental Pratincole** on the runway, as well as **White Tern**, **Nankeen Night Heron** and an **Asian Intermediate Egret**.

The next day the group boarded the ferry to Home Island where a female **ASIAN KOEL** revealed herself and **White-tailed tropicbirds** soared overhead.

Dan and Brett found an **EASTERN YELLOW WAGTAIL** and had brief views of a soaring **CHINESE SPARROWHAWK** which was inconveniently chased away by a flock of **White Terns**. We walked the coastline in search of the Common Cuckoo which Geof Christie had photographed two weeks previously but it was not sighted. As we approached the garbage tip a Grey Wagtail flew over head and a couple of people managed a flight shot but most missed it. This species was proving unexpectedly elusive but at least after 1.5 weeks of searching, we now knew where one could be.



Above: Eastern Yellow Wagtail, Home Island (R.Baxter)



Above: Bird hide West Island (Maggie Overend)

No one had ventured south of Home Island for two years to see if the long staying Chinese Pond Heron was still present. It had been on Cocos for 6-7yrs and was now possibly 8yrs old. How long does a pond heron live for? There was only one way to find out and the next day we ventured across the channel at low tide to explore the bays and sand flats towards South Island. Much to our relief we flushed the long staying **CHINESE POND HERON** from a pool at the end of a bay and it sat nicely on top of a bush allowing us to take some photos before it moved on to the nearby rock platform.



Above: Chinese Pond Heron (Mark Stanley)



Above: Chinese Pond Heron (Brett Whitfield)

Most of the group still needed to see the koel and sparrowhawk and they were the targets for the next two days. We arrived at the farm early and immediately flushed a male **ASIAN KOEL** from a Paw Paw tree. A quick scan of the fringing coconut trees and we found it perched watching us from a

distance. We waited for over an hour and watched it reposition to another tree but it never came close.

The sparrowhawks were seen the day before flying above the wetlands at 7.07am, so we departed the farm at 6.50am for the wetlands but this morning they decided to fly over at 6.50am and we missed them. Luckily we still had another morning to go.

After breakfast the group had a choice of going back to Home Island to hopefully locate the elusive Grey Wagtail or do a lagoon walk at low tide to obtain better/closer pics of the Purple Heron and also maybe find the Eurasian Curlew that was seen two weeks ago in the inner lagoon.

The plan worked well for both groups but with one major hiccup. Those on Home Island finally had good views of **GREY WAGTAIL** and those that did the lagoon walk also had much closer views of the **PURPLE HERON**. The added bonus was those who did the lagoon walk also had cracking views of a **COMMON KINGFISHER**! While creeping closer to the heron, Brett noticed the kingfisher perched low in a bush along the shoreline. They crept closer and were rewarded with some nice photos. After photographing the Purple Heron, the kingfisher flew out and landed on a dead stick over the water directly in front of us and then co-operatively proceeded to do a low level fly past.....amazing stuff.



Above: Common Kingfisher (Mark Stanley)



Above: Common Kingfisher (Brett Whitfield)

Those that went for the Grey Wagtail walked across the lagoon for the kingfisher the next day but couldn't find it. Very disappointing, as usually Common Kingfisher, once found on these islands are usually fairly site faithful.

Those that missed the sparrowhawk the day before assembled the next morning at the bird hide and were rewarded with three circling **CHINESE SPARROWHAWKS** !! An epic pre-breakfast sighting.



Above: Soaring Chinese Sparrowhawk. (Mark Stanley)

On our last full day on Cocos we headed over to South Island to see Saunders's Tern and were rewarded with fantastic views as several **SAUNDERS'S TERNS** flew around us and fed in shallow waters only 10m in front of us. You could not have asked for a better show.

Geof had seen two Eurasian Curlew in the weeks prior to our trip, so most of us opted to leave the terns and walk further across the sand flats in search of the two distant curlew. A couple of the group opted to stay with the terns and took some incredible photos, while the rest of us moved quickly to beat the incoming tide. After a bit of searching we located two **EURASIAN CURLEW** feeding on a muddy bank with around fifty **Whimbrel**. With a few distant photos taken and scope views, we hurried back to base for breakfast and a stop to see the relocated Blue-tailed Skinks from Christmas Island.

That same afternoon several of us spent a couple of hours at the bird hide and were rewarded with a much overdue visit from the long staying (four years) female **NORTHERN PINTAIL**.

On our final morning we once again had nice views of the **CHINESE SPARROWHAWK** before returning to our accommodation to pack and prepare for the flight back to Perth.



Above: Saunders's Tern (Carole-Anne Fooks)

## DECEMBER

The early December tour started only three days after the November tour finished and our main priority on the first morning was to walk across the inner lagoon for the **PURPLE HERON** and search for the kingfisher as we went along.

With low tide only one hour away we departed along the same path as last week, using the large bushes to conceal our approach. We crept along and soon had views through a window in the bushes at the Purple Heron standing out on the sand flats. A few of us took photos and we attempted to move closer but it flushed into the palm forest when we were still a fair distance away. It was still proving to be a very shy bird. As we turned the corner, some of us managed a couple of flight photos as it alighted from its palm frond, before we spent an uneventful forty minutes looking for the kingfisher, which had now most certainly moved on to another part of the lagoon.



Above: Purple Heron (R.Baxter)



Above: White-breasted Waterhen (R.Baxter)

After a successful morning with the heron we drove to the new bird hide where the **NORTHERN PINTAIL** was waiting for us on a fallen coconut palm. It was a great first day with two of the major targets seen.

On our second day we again had two big targets, Saunders's Tern and Eurasian Curlew. After arriving on South Island we initially couldn't see any terns but after a short walk eventually spotted three terns resting on a distant sand bar. Not exactly what we wanted as the plan was to quickly see the terns and then search for the curlew. Just as we started to walk to the far sandbar, seven **Saunders's Terns** took to the air and flew directly towards us and landed on the sandbar directly in front of us.....fantastic.



Above: Saunders's Tern (Bruce Richardson)

We all had good views and while the group were photographing the terns I scanned the area finding the **EURASIAN CURLEW** in the distance with 40-50 Whimbrel. Most of the group were happy with scope views, while Nick and Graham walked closer for photos but soon the tide turned and we all had to head for dry land where we had a champagne breakfast, prior to a quick visit to see Blue-tailed Skinks and nice drift snorkel on the edge of the reef.



Above: Group photo on South Island after seeing Saunders's Tern (Jaali) Above: Birding the big house

We next visited Home Island where there was no sign of the Grey Wagtail but we did manage to find a very confiding **Eastern Yellow Wagtail** and later in the day Alan photographed the dark phase **COMMON CUCKOO**.



Above: Dark phase hepatic Common Cuckoo (Alan Stringer and Geof Christie)

The cuckoos present on Cocos this year continued to elude us. After two weeks on the atoll we had only managed glimpses as they dart off at high speed. Some of us managed to see the elusive **COMMON CUCKOO** on Home Island and another cuckoo on West Island which has remained unidentified.

The following day many of us had brief views of the **Grey Wagtail** but with perseverance we finally got our bird not long after the workers had departed later in the afternoon.

The week was progressing quickly and we still had several birds to see. It was time to start seriously targeting some of the more regular visitors and the first of those was the redshank. The first location

produced three **Whimbrel**, so we moved on to the other side of the inner lagoon where not long after getting out of the car we had **COMMON REDSHANK** feeding on the mud near the shore.



Above: Common Redshank (Richard Baxter)

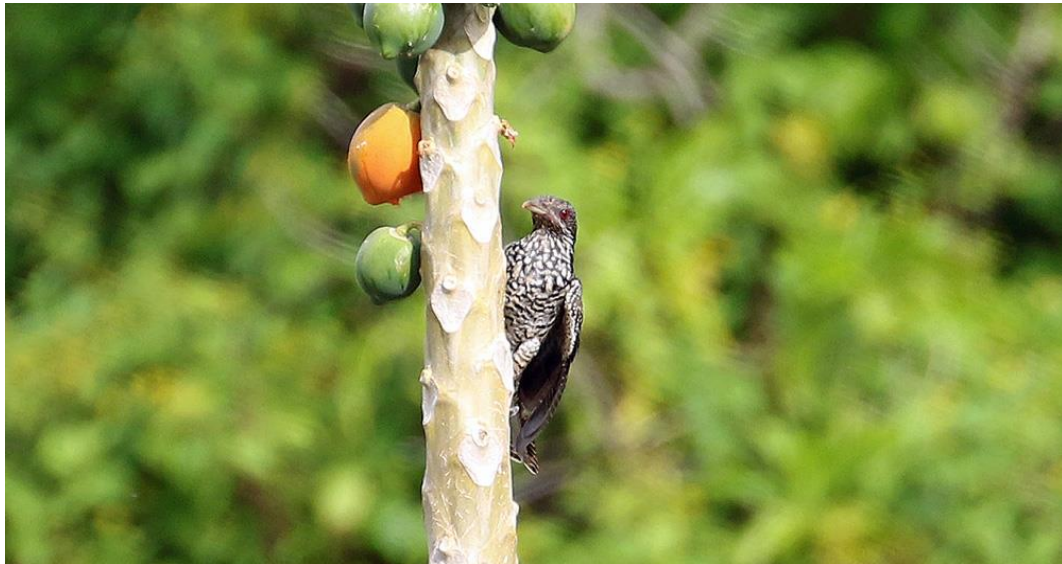


Above: Northern Pintail (R.Baxter)

The next stop was The Farm to look for Asian Koel but as we began to search for some ripe Papaya (the koel's favourite food), we flushed a **PIN-TAILED SNIPE** which landed close by. We quickly adjourned and went to inform Bruce, who was back at the motel. Not long after, those that needed to see the snipe had seen it at the farm and the nearby lake. A successful afternoon.

Wednesday afternoon was spent on Home Island where we flushed 1-2 **Common Cuckoos** and had a flyover **ASIAN KOEL**, prior to a great dinner at Seafront Restaurant.

Despite the occasional short views of Asian Koel a few people in the group had still not seen the bird, so on our second last morning four of us drove to the farm at 5am for a dawn stakeout. It only took 15minutes and we had an **ASIAN KOEL** sitting in a Papaya Tree.



Asian Koel (Richard Baxter)

From there we caught the ferry to Home Island, seeing numerous **White Terns** as well as **Western Reef Heron**, prior to walking across the channel for views of a very skittish **CHINESE POND HERON**.

We once again returned to Oceania House where we watched **Common Cuckoo** flush over the fence and disappear into the forest.

It was time to fly to Christmas Island but before departing we received news that the weather on the island was so bad they cancelled that leg of the flight and we returned to Perth for a day. Virgin kindly

put us in a nice inner city hotel and we had Saturday in the city and once the weather cleared, we flew to Christmas Island the next morning.

Our first target on Christmas Island was to find the stonechat. The location was remote and required a long walk in the heat, so we set off at 6am and reached the site after 2hrs of travel. We spread out and searched the area and with no bird seen we widened our search to nearby areas. After three hours of searching we finally gave up and returned to our vehicles. I had really hoped that this bird would stay around all Summer. The only interesting bird we saw along the way was an “Asian’ **Dollarbird**.

On the way back into town we made a detour to quickly search for the Malayan Night Heron which had been wandering the island’s tracks for several weeks. We were fortunate that the December crab migration had not yet begun, so many of the roads that were closed in November were now open. We drove to where we saw it in November but it wasn’t anywhere to be seen. It was time for lunch and we returned to our accommodation after a disappointing double dip morning.

Even though we’d dipped on the two vagrants, we’d made good progress on the local endemics and specialties and had seen **Christmas Island White-eye, Common (Asian) Emerald Dove, Christmas Island Imperial Pigeon** and **Red-footed Booby**.



Above: Christmas Island Imperial Pigeon (Richard Baxter)

We may have dipped on the night heron but we hadn’t given up and were soon back in the forest slowly searching the trails. As I scanned the roadside verges for movement, there it was, walking slowly forward away from us. I stopped and announced to the others that I’d found our target and it hadn’t flown off. It had cautiously crept about 15m away from us but had now stopped and was searching for food amongst the leaves. The best option was to stay inside the vehicles and with a bit of slow manoeuvring over 30minutes, we all had exceptional views of what can be a very shy bird.



Brown Booby (Richard Baxter)

With **MALAYAN NIGHT HERON** seen, we switched focus to the island's coastline where we had good views of **Christmas Frigatebird**, **Brown Booby**, both **Greater** and **Lesser Frigatebird** as well as both **Red-tailed** and **White-tailed Tropicbird**.



Above: White-tailed Tropicbird (Richard Baxter)

The following morning we walked through Settlement where we found 15 **Java Sparrows** and 20+ **Eurasian Tree Sparrows**, while an **Island Thrush** posed perfectly for us on a nearby branch.

With Lynda's help it once again didn't take long to get good views of **Christmas Boobook** in the early evening before adjourning to dinner.

Over the next few days those with cameras continued to attempt to get in-focus photos of the fast-flying **Christmas Island Swiftlet** as well as high-flying **Abbott's Booby**. **Red Junglefowl** showed well along the rainforest tracks and two '**Asian**' **Intermediate Egrets** were frequently seen along the coast.

The often inquisitive local race of **Brown Goshawk**, which can be a difficult species to locate proved easy this time and we managed to get good flight and perched views several times across the island and the smaller **Nankeen Kestrel** was numerous with twenty seen daily.



Above: Brown (Christmas Island) Goshawk (R.Baxter)

We received news of a pond heron on the sports field and soon found it feeding on the oval along with a **Glossy Ibis** and several Feral Chickens. In non-breeding plumage, pond herons are notoriously difficult to identify to species level, although I suspect this one was a Chinese Pond Heron. If it hangs around for another couple of months, perhaps we will establish its true identity.



With only a couple of days to go, we drove down the laneway at the side of the airport and as we turned at the end, Tanya spotted a small brown bird perched high on a dead bush close by. It was a **BROWN SHRIKE** and a co-operative one as well. One of Australia's rarest and most sought-after specials.....amazing! Even though it moved to another bush, we all managed stellar perched views and great photos of this difficult to connect with rarity.



Above: Brown Shrike (Tanya Hattingh) and (Bruce Richardson)

With a significant amount of rain on the last day we continued to see small numbers of **White-breasted Waterhen** as well as a **Common Greenshank** and a **Common Sandpiper** on the edge of a pool of water. The final bird of the trip was a **PIN-TAILED SNIPE** flushed from an area of long grass, which was soon followed by another five snipe, which were probably the same species, finishing off a great fortnight.

#### DECEMBER XMAS AND NYE TOUR

As I waited outside of arrivals a large tropical storm darkened the horizon and was quickly approaching the island. It was touch and go if the Virgin flight would arrive before the storm. The plane landed and 15 minutes later the storm also touched down drenching the island.

We managed to get to the supermarket just before closing time and with an hour of daylight remaining, we headed back up the hill for a quick and rewarding search for the shrike. Not long after arriving we marvelled at a stunning **BROWN SHRIKE** posing nicely on top of a dead stick, allowing a couple of photos before the light faded and we adjourned for a BBQ dinner. A great start to the first day.

Day two started with over twenty **Java Sparrows** and both male and female **ASIAN KOEL**. The female koel posed nicely for photos before breakfast, while **Island Thrush** and **Christmas Island Swiftlet** were common nearby.

Visiting some grassy areas produced **PIN-TAILED SNIPE** and once again **Christmas Island Imperial Pigeon**, **Common Emerald Dove** and **Christmas Island White-eye** were easily seen.



Above: Java Sparrows (Richard Baxter)

In November the rainforest tracks were closed but with the main Red Crab migration over we were now able to drive most of the island's interior tracks. We slowly crept along the trails finding several large Robber (Coconut) Crabs and a few shy **Common Emerald Dove**. After 45min we came around a bend and there standing on the side of the road was a magnificent **MALAYAN NIGHT HERON**, the afternoon's main target. It took a nervous few moments before we all managed to get onto the bird, with only some in the group initially able to see it. As it turned out, we needn't have worried, as we all enjoyed excellent looks at this highly sought-after species, leaving us all very happy. We enjoyed half an hour with the bird before it was time to leave, achieving much better views than in November.



Above: Malayan Night Heron and Group looking at the Brown Shrike (Alex Wnorowski)

**Christmas Boobook** once again performed beautifully for us all in the early evening prior to finishing the day at the local Chinese restaurant, Lucky Ho's.

It had been a month since the November Red Crab migration and we were lucky to be on the island when the baby crabs returned. One day there were none and the next day they were everywhere, tens of millions of baby crabs covering kilometres of the island. It was amazing for the group to see but not so amazing that some of the roads were closed due to the huge numbers of babies moving inland.



Above: Baby Red Crabs arriving at Flying Fish Cove (R.Baxter)

The next morning our plans were washed away with three hours of torrential rain. It was too heavy to walk anywhere, so we set off through the forest in the cars and explored some of the island's more remote tracks. Our efforts were rewarded as we passed a grassy section and I spotted something in the grass, which I couldn't identify. We did a U-turn down the road and crept back to the site to find a stunning and very wet **YELLOW BITTERN** doing its best to stay hidden. It was the first Yellow Bittern of the Summer and great to see.



Above: Yellow Bittern (Richard Baxter)



Above: Common Emerald Dove (Bill Russell)

In the afternoon, with a break in the weather Bill and Elliot, while driving along the island's plateau found a nice **EURASIAN HOBBY**, and the rest of us had cracking views of **Great Frigatebird**, **White-tailed Tropicbird** and **Red-footed Booby**.

Once again we did the long walk to the stonechat site and once again, despite a long search, failed to re-find the bird. Although the stonechat was absent, we did manage to get good views of a *calidus* **Peregrine Falcon**, which was constantly being harassed by frigatebirds as it patrolled the area. While we were away, Ted checked the area where a Rosy Starling was recently seen and saw a possible bunting associating with a flock of **Tree Sparrows**.



Above: Peregrine Falcon (Elliot Leach)



Above: Island Thrush (Richard Baxter)

The following day we searched the area and Glen Pacey was able to get brief views of the bird that he was confident was a **Yellow-breasted Bunting**. We birded most of the day and at 4pm drove out to North West Point where we found a young **Abbott's Booby** sitting quietly on a nest, tucked away in the sub-canopy of one of the tall rainforest trees on the island's plateau. With Abbott's Booby in the bag, we'd seen all the island's endemics and specialties.



Above: Abbott's Booby (R.Baxter)

It wasn't long and it was Christmas Day. After a full morning of birding we adjourned to the veranda of our accommodation where we had a nice XMAS lunch and that afternoon the **Eurasian Hobby** was briefly seen again moving across the island just prior to dusk.



Above: XMAS lunch (Alex Wnorowski)



Above: Christmas Island White-eye (R.Baxter)

After dinner the following night we visited several sites in search of vagrant nightjars and owls. I wasn't very hopeful after not finding anything on the two previous trips but this time I decided to visit three different locations. After playing the call of Northern Boobook there was a distant reply. We waited and played the call again and this time the call was louder and perhaps closer. That night the owl didn't show itself but the next night we returned to the same spot and successfully added **NORTHERN BOOBOOK** to the trip list.

A surprise find on the side of the main road was a **Black Bittern**, which scampered out of site, over the tree tops but did hang around just long enough for all to see. Returning from the forest a **YELLOW BITTERN** flew across in front of the car and before finishing for the day we had prolonged views of the **BROWN SHRIKE** feeding at the end of the runway.



Above: The endemic Christmas Island Fruit Bat (R.Baxter) Above: Yellow Bittern (R.Baxter)

On Tuesday we flew to Cocos where two new species had arrived on the island since our previous trip.



Above: Christmas Island Imperial Pigeon and The Blowholes (R.Baxter)

## Cocos

We landed on a beautiful sunny afternoon and quickly added **Green Junglefowl** to our trip list as well as **White Tern** and **Lesser Frigatebird** before having dinner at Tropika Restaurant.

On our first morning on Cocos we had two big new targets Cinnamon Bittern and Watercock, both of which had been seen only days before our arrival. We searched the green waste area of the garbage tip but there was no bittern to be seen. From there we spent the morning at the new bird hide in the hope that a sparrowhawk would fly over but it was not to be. While the others were scanning for sparrowhawks, I took Sue and Elliot to The Farm where we saw a single **WATERCOCK**.



Above: Watercock (Elliot Leach)

Being Wednesday, we caught the ferry to Home Island for dinner. We stood in the centre of the garden scanning the trees when a stunning little **CHINESE SPARROWHAWK** decided to circle overhead. It flew back and forth around the gardens for several minutes and was later seen again by members of the group as we wandered the grounds.

The Wednesday evening meal at Seafront Restaurant on Home Island was once again sensational and we caught the 8pm ferry back home a happy bunch of birders.



Above: Green Junglefowl and Eastern and Western Reef Egret (R.Baxter)

The next morning we drove the side of the runway in search of Watercock. I had not long finished telling those in my car that we will only get flight views as they always flush into the palm forest, when a **WATERCOCK** jumped up from the long grass near the car and flew 40m away from us and proceeded to stand still on the grass and look at us. Incredible, we very rarely see Watercock on the ground as they are such secretive and shy birds.

After a quick breakfast we drove to canoe beach and crossed the channel to South Island where the day just got better. After initially spotting several **Saunders's Terns** on a sandbar ahead of us, we crept closer until only 30m away. As we examined the birds through the scope, one inquisitive bird flew directly towards us and proceeded to hang in the air only 3m above our heads. We all reached for our cameras and took some great photos. Over the next thirty minutes several birds caught fish in the shallow waters around us as we all watched and thoroughly enjoyed the spectacle.



Above: Champagne celebration after seeing the Saunders's Terns    Above: White-breasted Waterhen (R.Baxter)



Above: Chinese Pond Heron (Elliot Leach)

The **PURPLE HERON** continued to be elusive and that afternoon we walked the banks of the inner lagoon eventually finding our target on the far side in company with a lone **EURASIAN CURLEW** and four Whimbrel.



Above: White Tern (R.Baxter)



Above: sea watching for Masked Booby (R.Baxter)

The following day we walked across from Home Island to see the **CHINESE POND HERON** and were rewarded with a **CHINESE SPARROWHAWK** chasing White Terns in the same bay. After the successful foray for the heron, we met in the gardens of Oceania House where Geof had seen an Asian Brown Flycatcher the day before. We searched for three hours without success and just before departing for the ferry I decided to play the call to elicit some sort of response. Within a few seconds an **ASIAN BROWN FLYCATCHER** flew out of the forest behind me and into the canopy of the tree we'd been

scanning for a while. As fast as it arrived, it disappeared, so we called it a day and decided to resume the search the next day. As we drove home, we caught up with Geof Christie who had found the Cinnamon Bittern dead and looking like a cat had killed it. Sad news but not unexpected as the feral cat population on Cocos continues to grow.



Above: Dollarbird (Richard Baxter)



Above: The lake (R.Baxter)

Although we'd finished birding, the day was far from over, for it was New Years Eve and the annual Cocos NYE party was about to start on the waterfront at Scout Park. Barefoot on the sand, with the clear lagoon waters nearby, a BBQ dinner, drinks and chatting with the locals made for a good night. The theme was 'jungle-safari' which suited us birders just fine as some chose to wear their birding clothes and binos to the party while others in our group dressed in a variety of outfits. A few of us made it to the midnight fireworks and home in plenty of time for the morning birding session.



Above: Chinese Sparrowhawk (Richard Baxter)

The following morning we again drove the runway verge but this time only located **four Intermediate Egrets** before catching the ferry across the lagoon. On our final morning on Home Island we again targeted the **ASIAN BROWN FLYCATCHER** and after having spent much time over the last few days searching for flycatchers and not seeing any, we were elated when we obtained some views almost

as soon as we stepped out of the buggy, as it perched for us and flittered amongst the thin foliage. We were all very happy that our perseverance had paid off.



Above: Asian Brown Flycatcher (Richard Baxter)

After stopping for burgers for lunch we made a short stop at the sewage works where we had brief views of the very shy **GREY WAGTAIL** before saying goodbye to Home Island.

During the afternoon lunch break I dropped Elliot off for a snorkel and when returning to our accommodation spotted a passerine on top of a bush at the end of the runway. Damn, I didn't have my camera or bins with me. An attempt at a phone photo was thwarted when another car drove by and flushed it further across the area just before I could get a photo. I raced back to the accommodation and gathered everyone before returning to the site where we eventually located a **ROSY STARLING** not all that far from the initial sighting. We watched the bird eat berries for an hour and then departed for a dinner of our own.



Above: Scanning for Buff-banded Rail (R.Baxter)



Above: New Years Eve (R.Baxter)

On our final full day of the tour we set off at low tide across the lagoon to search for the Common Kingfisher which Geof had re-found the previous morning. Not seen since Nov, it had eluded us for four weeks. We departed at low tide, reached the far shore and crept slowly along the beach behind cover. From behind a large bush we peered into the bay and immediately saw a stunning little

**COMMON KINGFISHER** fly out into the middle of the bay, then plunge vertically into the shallows for a fish and then perch on an overhanging branch for us all to see. You could not have asked for a better start to the day.

The final morning was busy with packing and preparing for the flight but we did have enough time however to steadily catch up on several of our missing targets, the most important of which was the **WATERCOCK** at the farm, which showed well for those that needed better views, bringing what was a very successful trip to an end.



Above: Group photos (Bill Russell)

## JANUARY TOUR

The first two days of the January tour were a 48hr tick-fest. One of the real benefits of the January tour is that I'd had six weeks on the islands and had most vagrants nailed down. Our two day vagrant list was:

**Watercock**

**Chinese Sparrowhawk**

**Asian Brown Flycatcher**

**Asian Koel**

**Japanese Sparrowhawk**

**Common Redshank**

**Rosy Starling and Purple Heron!**

Along with these we'd also seen **White-breasted Waterhen**, **Green Junglefowl** and **Western Reef Heron**.

Not long after the plane had departed our first drive was to the end of the runway to see four **ROSY STARLING** sitting in the same bush....incredible! With only 30 minutes of daylight remaining we ventured to the other end of the runway where the **PURPLE HERON** appeared from behind a bush and flew in front of us, eventually perching on a palm frond for all to see. We could not have asked for a better first afternoon.

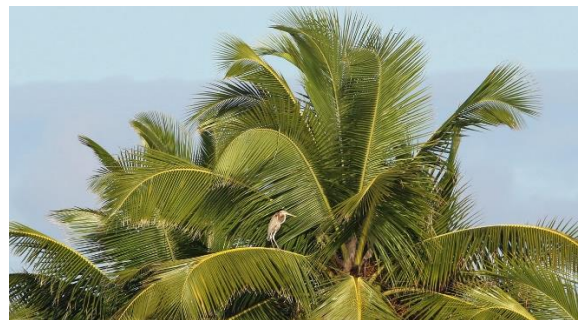


Above: Rosy Starling (R.Baxter)

On our first morning at The Farm the most co-operative **WATERCOCK** we've ever seen on Cocos continued to show well and the male **ASIAN KOEL** performed darting flybys as we staked out the Watercock. As we waited for the Watercock to come closer a sparrowhawk swooped down after some young chickens but disappeared from view. It was an exciting first morning and for all but one person in the group it was their first time on the islands. As we departed, the sparrowhawk flew from its perch and we managed some nice photos and looks at a much welcome **CHINESE SPARROWHAWK**. Incredible birding indeed!



Above: Fem Green Junglefowl (Richard Baxter)



Above: Purple Heron (Richard Baxter)

That afternoon we found the **Black-tailed Godwit** and the not so **COMMON REDSHANK** at the Bottle Dump where we were treated to superb views of this unique wader. Not long after, a couple of us had brief views of the **ASIAN BROWN FLYCATCHER** near Government House and a fly-over of several **Lesser Frigatebirds**. A ridiculously good first full day.



Above: Common Redshank (Rob Shore)



Above: White Tern (R.Baxter)

On our second morning we found the first **JAPANESE SPARROWHAWK** of the season, flushed two **WATERCOCK** and had nice views of a **Western Reef Egret** before adjourning for lunch and a midday swim. While we birded on West Island James and Kerrie spent the day on Direction Island and obtained good views of the local **Buff-banded Rail** sub-species.

That afternoon we photographed two **Oriental Dollarbirds**, had better views of the **Asian Brown Flycatcher** and flushed a bittern before finishing the day with Pizzas at the club.



Above: Japanese Sparrowhawk (James Ardill)



Above: Watercock (R.Baxter)

We walked across the channel towards South Island to see the **Chinese Pond Heron** which unfortunately only appeared briefly when it darted over the trees, not be seen again. While preparing for the pond heron walk we found our third **ASIAN BROWN FLYCATCHER** of the trip near the sailing club.

Our next trip to South Island involved an early start to ensure we had the correct tide and depth of water at the sand bars. The morning was overcast and dark clouds surrounded the atoll. We made our way across the channel, seeing **Common Noddy**, **White Tern** and even a couple of **Saunders's Terns** feeding in the shallows. We walked out across the sandflats with the tide about to turn and as we progressed we found the usual array of shorebirds which included **Lesser Sandplover**, **Ruddy Turnstone**, **Red-necked Stint**, **Bar-tailed Godwit**, **Grey** and **Pacific Golden Plover**, as well as 40+ **Whimbrel**.

The **Saunders's Terns** were co-operative and minutes after finding the terns we also had scope views of the **Eurasian Curlew** on the far bank with the **Whimbrel**. After a Champagne breakfast and a quick look at the Blue-tailed skinks, we opted for some snorkelling time. We drifted around one of the islands and enjoyed our time in the water. Just as we were setting off to leave, the skies opened up and we were drenched. Fortunately dry bags are compulsory on the these tours and all the rain did was wash off the salt and cool us down. It was a great morning.



Above: White-breasted Waterhen (Richard Baxter)



Above: Barn Swallow ( James Ardill)

If there's a single bird that everyone in the group will remember for many years, it will be Common Kingfisher. It had taken up residence on the far side of the inner lagoon and to see it required a walk across the shallow waters to the other side. This is best done at low tide and unfortunately the tide times weren't conducive to seeing our elusive target. During our week on Cocos, low tide fell in the middle of the day and we made two attempts to find our target, with very limited success. On our first crossing there was no sign of it and the second time we explored distant bays and examined overhanging branches in the hope of spotting a small orange and blue speck in the distance but it was not to be. While we scoured the shoreline through our binoculars, James saw our target dart across the bay and disappear into the trees. It was good news. At least it was still around, even if no one else saw it.



Above: Walking to the jetty (Allan Suter)



Above: Buff-banded Rail (James Ardill)

Our final chance came on our last full day when low tide was a 3.30am. We departed our accommodation in the dark and arrived at the waters edge in the pre-dawn light. As the sun slowly rose we made our way across the inner lagoon dodging many sleeping turtles along the way. Once on the other side we crept through the bushes and Jill spotted our target perched out on a branch over the water on the other side of the small bay. **COMMON KINGFISHER** ! We'd all worked hard for it and what an incredible sighting. For the next half an hour we had the privilege of spending time with the little avian gem. We all breathed a heavy sigh of relief and marvelled at the extraordinary morning we'd had.



Above: Common Kingfisher (Rob Shore)



Above: Common Kingfisher (James Ardill)

Over the week we continued to visit the farm where on each occasion we had increasingly memorable encounters with what was now 3-4 sparrowhawks. There were two **CHINESE SPARROWHAWKS** and possibly two **JAPANESE SPARROWHAWKS** present at different times. These were joined by 2-4 **Dollarbirds** which harassed the raptors and subsequently made it easier for us to find them. We enjoyed prolonged looks at these scares megas both perched and in flight.



Above: Chinese Sparrowhawk (Rob Shore)



Above: Chinese Sparrowhawk (Richard Baxter)

On our final afternoon on Home Island we split up into two groups. One group spent the afternoon in the grounds of Oceania House where they found several **Barn Swallows** soaring over the gardens and the other group searched the northern end of the island. With nothing exciting found at the northern end we dropped into the sewage works where the Grey Wagtail had been seen two weeks previously. With no sign of the bird, I played the call and just when we were about to give up Mary-Ann spotted the **GREY WAGTAIL** fly out from behind the tanks towards the garbage tip. Over the next 30min we had several flight views as it darted across above us until we had to depart for dinner.

Our last full day was spent on West Island where we searched for an elusive bittern which we'd seen twice in the forest but not long enough to ID, as well as cleaning up a few species which people needed better views of. It was a successful day which began with two **Pin-tailed Snipe** and ended with a few people seeing the **SCHRENCK'S BITTERN** in flight before it disappeared into the calophyllum trees.

It had been an extremely successful week on Cocos .....



Above: Schrenck's Bittern (Geof Christie)



Above: Intermediate Egret (R.Baxter)

## Christmas Island

With a 4pm arrival on Christmas Island we dropped our bags off at Cocos Padang Lodge and did a quick run to the supermarket. With groceries in the fridge and with an hour of daylight remaining we decided to shoot up to the airport to see if the shrike was still about after two weeks on Cocos. We parked at the spot and within minutes Shelley found the **BROWN SHRIKE** close to the car and we all had great views of what has been a very co-operative vagrant.

The following day our target was **Malayan Night Heron** and by the end of the day we had found three!!

We visited many of the islands birding spots and had great views of **Brown Booby** and **Red-tailed Tropicbird** along the northern coast, while the golden morph **White-tailed Tropicbirds** were abundant overhead, as was **Great Frigatebird**.



Red-tailed Tropicbird (R.Baxter)

In the forest and around town we had close views of **Island Thrush**, **CI White-eye**, **Christmas Island Imperial Pigeon** and **Common Emerald Dove**.

Everywhere we ventured **Christmas Island Swiftlet** teased those with cameras as they darted about the forest and disappeared behind trees leaving not quite enough time for a photo.



Above: Christmas Island Swiftlet (R.Baxter)



Above: Korean BBQ night (Allan Suter)

Our next morning's target was **Java Sparrow** and they made us wait nearly an hour before they arrived, firstly teasing us with a couple of flybys and then eventually stopping to sit where the entire group had great views. At the same time **Eurasian Tree Sparrow** showed well, which was a lifer for a couple of people in the group.

Over the course of the following morning we stopped to see **Red Junglefowl** patrolling the forest edge of many of the island's internal tracks. We slowed as we drove past the golf course finding two **White-**

**faced Heron**, while large numbers of **Christmas Frigatebirds** soared nearby. On our occasional visits to Flying Fish Cove we saw two dark phase **Eastern Reef Egrets** and the Christmas Island race of **Brown Goshawk** showed well in several locations.

After lunch we found another **Intermediate Egret**, as well as the occasional roadside **White-breasted Waterhen** and a **Pacific Golden Plover** on the rocks between Lilly and Ethel Beach. Some members of the group spent time searching for the bunting seen last fortnight but it was not seen again. A lone **Barn Swallow** was seen near our accommodation and late that afternoon we stopped by the end of the runway where we watched a *calidus* **Peregrine Falcon** fly down the valley and perch on the far side of the runway.



Christmas Frigatebird (Richard Baxter)

Our evening of spotlighting failed to find any rarities and we finished the night on the edge of town where we enjoyed some time with a **Christmas Boobook** which perched nicely allowing extended views for our group. What a great way to end off another fabulous day.

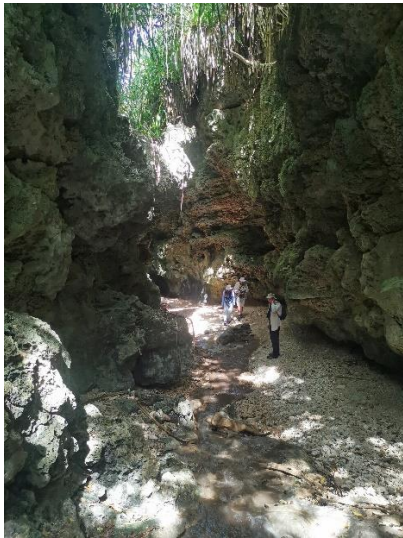
We took the opportunity to drive the Winifred Beach Track which was open for the first time all season. It was slow going because of the Red Crabs. Despite the migration being over they were still thick in several sections and in the end we opted to turn back for lunch about 800m from the end. Despite not making it to the end it was still a nice drive through some magnificent rainforest. Later that afternoon we returned to the north western end of the island where we spent an afternoon firstly watching a couple of **Abbott's Booby** sitting in the trees and then repositioned to spend some more time watching a couple more Abbott's returning to their trees after feeding forays at sea.



Above: Abbott's Booby (Rob Shore)

The next day we visited The Farm where we watched **Christmas, Lesser and Greater Frigatebirds** swoop down and drink from the dam, joined by the occasional **Christmas Island Swiftlet**.

The morning of our second last day was spent at The Dales. The road to The Dales had been closed all Summer due to the Red Crab migration and this was the first time I had been able to drive all the way to the carpark. We walked to the waterfall, which had collapsed the previous week while we were on Cocos and then had time to walk to Anderson's Dale where we clambered down the chasm to the ocean. Along the way we found **Striated Heron**. It was fun to add a bit of adventurous scrambling to the trip.



Above: Anderson's Dale (R.Baxter)

Above: Group Photo

The morning of our final full day of the tour was spent on Dolly Beach. We walked in and took our swim wear with us as well as a large bag so we could pick up any beach plastic while we were there. After a bit of beach clean up we hopped into the large rock pool and lazed around for half an hour until I spotted a large raptor over the palm trees. None of us had binoculars or cameras with us while swimming and as the raptor approached closer and its features became clearer we ran to our bags and James managed a quick photo of **CRESTED (Oriental) HONEY BUZZARD**, the final vagrant of the trip.

The following day everyone flew back to Perth ending a very successful Summer.



Crested Honey Buzzard (James Ardill)



Above: Dolly Beach (R.Baxter)

Over the Summer we accumulated a cracking list of vagrants, as well as obtained great views of the island's endemics and specialties. Many of the vagrants were initially found in November and stayed all Summer, while some were seen just once and never seen again. Several were fairly site faithful and once found were easy to relocate while others proved to be exceedingly shy and elusive, requiring many hours of searching. Thanks must go to a wonderful group of enthusiastic participants, as well as a superb ground operations team. I trust you will all hold many good memories from this tour for a long time into the future!

Some more trip photos by

Maggie Overend, Richard Baxter, Bill Russell, Mary Hynes, Alex Wnorowski and Allan Suter.



