

Christmas Island and Cocos Keeling Islands Trip Report Summer 2019-20

Richard Baxter - Birding Tours Australia



Above: Purple Heron (R.Baxter)

Nov-Dec-Jan top sightings

1. Purple Heron
2. Slaty-breasted Rail
3. Northern Boobook
4. Mugimaki Flycatcher
5. Narcissus Flycatcher
6. Breeding plumage Chinese and Javan Pond Herons on the same trip
7. Dark-sided Flycatcher
8. Arctic Warbler
9. Eye-browed Thrush
10. Chinese and Japanese Sparrowhawks

Our first week on Christmas Island had come to an end and we celebrated the impressive list of birds we'd seen and photographed at our final dinner on the island, while we also wondered what avian gems were waiting for us on Cocos during our second week.

We'd met at Perth Airport seven days previously and most of the group already knew each other, which made for a successful, productive and sociable photography focused tour.

After landing on Christmas Island we checked in and managed to easily see a couple of **Island Thrush**, **Christmas Island White-Eye**, **Red Junglefowl**, **White-tailed Tropicbird** and **Great Frigatebirds** on the way to our accommodation. Our final stop of the afternoon was at the nearby cliffs to see **Red-tailed Tropicbird** where we were also rewarded with a lone **BARN SWALLOW**, the only one we found all summer. Our first night finished with a nice BBQ at Flying Fish Cove.



Christmas Island White-eye & Red-footed Booby (R.Baxter)

Day two began with an early morning walk which yielded nice views of the resident **Java Sparrows** and **Eurasian Tree Sparrows** as well as hundreds of **Red-footed Booby** before breakfast.

Over the next three days we explored the island, travelling many of the island's tracks which were open because the Red Crab migration hadn't started due to the dry weather. During the day Tania found two **YELLOW WAGTAILS** in the centre of the island and we soon all gathered to photograph the two very co-operative birds which sat nicely on top of a nearby bush for us.



Yellow Wagtail (R.Baxter)

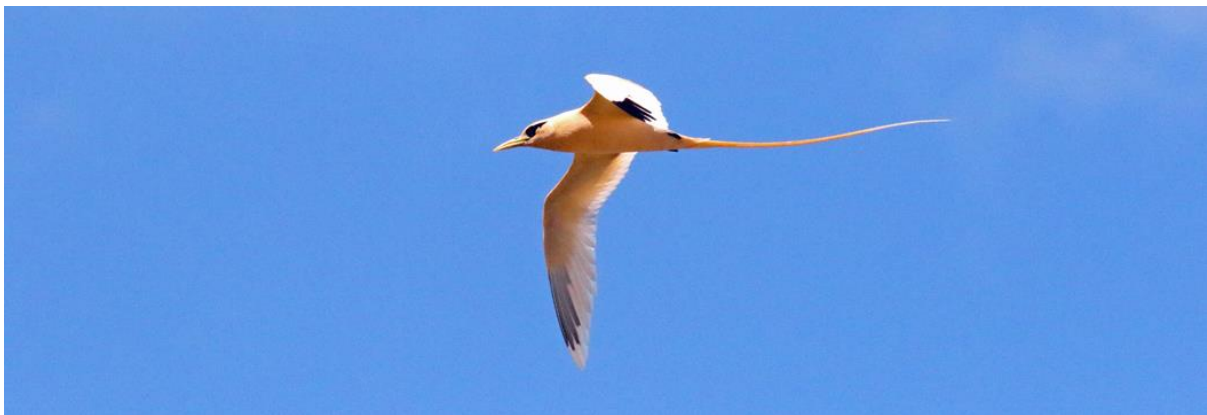
We visited the island's cliffs where **Brown Boobies** cruised at head height and **Common Noddies** rested on the offshore buoys. The occasional **Lesser Frigatebird** was spotted amongst the thousands of **Christmas Frigatebird** and high above us **Abbott's Booby** returned from their long distance forays.

Along the forest tracks we regularly encountered **Common Emerald Dove** and we saw thousands of **Christmas Island Swiftlet** at canopy level. **Christmas Island Imperial Pigeon** is ubiquitous and we counted around five hundred nearly every day.



Brown Booby & male Christmas Frigatebird (R.Baxter)

We visited a lookout where the photography opportunities were endless, although the undoubted highlight was seeing the breathtaking golden morph **White-tailed Tropicbird**, the World's most beautiful seabird. **Great Frigatebirds** and **Christmas Frigatebirds** also soared above, below and at eye height while we took photos. What a show they gave us and we enjoyed spending an hour with these amazing pre-historic looking frigatebirds! We would return to this site many times.



Above: White-tailed Tropicbird (R.Baxter)

One of the reasons we find so many great birds on these tours is over the years I've got to know many of the locals who keep an eye out for unusual birds while I'm here. The following afternoon I received a message from Sam who'd seen a bittern fly across Flying Fish Cove. From his description it sounded like a cinnamon, so we headed to the cove for a search. As we prepared to leave, John texted me about an unusual heron at the far end of the island!

We searched the rocky western shoreline of the cove for thirty minutes without success and then headed across the island to see if we could locate the mystery heron. I'd expected the heron to be a night heron and as we drove down the little-used road towards where it had been seen, there it was, a magnificent **PURPLE HERON** standing in the middle of a small clearing. An incredible sight and long overdue. After just a few photos were taken it flew to a nearby clearing and then it was lost sight of.

We didn't see it again over the rest of week. What a shy, frustrating and uncooperative bird! Absolutely exhilarated we drove back to our accommodation and finished the night with a delicious Chinese dinner.



Above: Purple Heron (R.Baxter)

As we birded the island we took the time to photograph the resident sub species of **Brown Goshawk**, as well as several seabirds roosting and on their nests. We located **White-breasted Waterhen, Little Egret, Striated Heron, Peregrine Falcon** (calidus) and the Asian nominate race of **Intermediate Egret**, which has been split from the Australian Plumed Egret by Birdlife International.

Well pleased with our morning sightings we boarded our boat after lunch for a photography cruise along the protected northern coastline, with a couple of snorkelling stops thrown in for those that had brought their gear. The highlight was having over 300 frigatebirds and boobies around the boat at one time, needless to say, the photographic opportunities were fabulous!



Leucistic Red-footed Booby & Spinner Dolphins (R.Baxter)

That night we had an early dinner and drove into the forest in search of the endemic **Christmas Boobook**, the island's only resident nocturnal bird. The outing didn't take long as the boobook appeared on cue at our first stop.



The following morning was one of those incredible mornings that Christmas Island sometimes delivers. At 6am we drove to the rubbish tip and while slowly walking through the lower section a small passerine flew overhead and disappeared into the canopy of a nearby tree and it wasn't a white-eye, the island's only resident small passerine. After that the fun began....

As it moved across the exposed canopy branches of several trees we crept closer and soon were close enough to identify it as a flycatcher. It co-operated and stayed in the same tree for a while and with better views I said to Tania, "this could be a Dark-sided".

From there it flew deep into a leafy tree and was lost sight of. We commenced a stakeout which lasted two hours, most of the time just seeing movement deep in the foliage. After a while I snuck around the side and waited patiently on top of a limestone mound. My patience was rewarded and eventually our target landed on an exposed branch revealing the blue upperparts of a stunning little **BLUE & WHITE FLYCATCHER**.



Blue & White (type) Flycatcher (R.Baxter)

I was now confused. Were there two vagrant flycatchers in the same tree or did I get the identification of the bird that flew over our heads earlier, totally wrong? I guessed it was the latter as immature Blue and White Flycatchers front on with their dusky flanks can appear like the migratory brown flycatchers from a distance.

We continued our stake-out, as fortunately we hadn't seen anything leave the tree. Unfortunately, as the minutes ticked by we didn't see any movement in the tree either. Then I saw a small flycatcher land deep in the foliage with its back to me. There was no blue and it quickly repositioned out of sight again. I picked up my radio and said to the group, "You're not going to believe this but I think there's TWO different flycatchers in that tree".

Another half an hour went by and we had the tree surrounded at a distance. Everyone now had seen the blue and white and we searched for the smaller bird. I was standing to the right of the tree and watched the **Blue and White 'type' Flycatcher** fly 50m away into another tree. At the same time the other small flycatcher jumped onto a branch in front of the entire group revealing itself as a cracking **DARK-SIDED FLYCATCHER**. This highly sought-after species was a first record for the island and a tick for all of us.



Dark-sided Flycatcher (R.Baxter)



Dark-sided Flycatcher (R.Baxter)

That night we celebrated our highly successful week on the island with a BBQ around the pool. We'd found some nice birds and the photographers in the group had taken some great photos and there was only one morning remaining before our flight to Cocos but that was enough time to find one last rare vagrant.

Having scoured the island over the last seven days we decided to spend the last morning at the location where we'd had our most success, the rubbish tip. We arrived at 6am and walked to the flycatcher spot but there were no flycatchers to be seen. As we waited and watched, I saw a small raptor circling in the distance. As it came closer I yelled to the group that it could be a sparrowhawk and then the birding gods shone our way and it headed straight for us, circling directly overhead, revealing itself as an impressive **CHINESE SPARROWHAWK**, a real end of week bonus.



Chinese Sparrowhawk (R.Baxter)

Our first few days on Cocos were a blur of non-stop vagrants. Driving the length of West Island we came across a co-operative **ORIENTAL CUCKOO** as well as two of the local specialties **White-breasted Waterhen** and **Green Junglefowl**.



Oriental Cuckoo (R.Baxter)

From the cuckoo we drove to see the long staying **JAVAN POND HERON** in the lagoon and the **CHINESE POND HERON** on the runway.



Javan Pond Heron (R.Baxter)

Our trip to South Island revealed eight **SAUNDERS'S TERN** loafing on a sandbank and feeding in the shallows which allowed a close approach.



Saunders's Tern (R.Baxter)

After taking a gazillion tern photos the group moved off in search of a small flock of stints, which we saw fly past as we approached the terns. We quickly located the stints and soon had one, maybe two **LITTLE STINT** in the scope before they relocated due to the rising tide. As Tania and Wayne had previously seen Little Stint elsewhere, they set off in a different direction and were soon calling on the radio with news of four **COMMON REDSHANK**.

With all our targets seen, a champagne breakfast consumed, followed by a dip the lagoon, it had been a highly successful morning and we were a happy bunch of birders making our way back across the lagoon.

The following day we saw **Lesser Frigatebird, Wood Sandpiper, Eastern Yellow Wagtail, White Tern** and **Dollarbird**. That afternoon we visited the farm in search of koels and as we walked through the back paddock two people in the group saw a small bird move in a tree in the neighbouring paddock, possibly a flycatcher. We spread out and scanned the tree for thirty minutes without seeing any movement. Just as we were about to give up, Geof Christie walked in and said, "I've just photographed an **ASIAN BROWN FLYCATCHER** nearby"!

We quickly made our way to the cars and within minutes were looking at a cracking little flycatcher which we returned to see again early the following morning.



Asian Brown Flycatcher (R.Baxter)

The following morning we were on the early ferry to Home Island in search of the Chestnut-winged Cuckoo that had returned to the island after first arriving last summer. We spent the morning searching the grounds of Oceania House, finding **Nankeen Night Herons** and a nesting **White-tailed Tropicbird**. Over the next few hours we searched the usual hotspots but the island hadn't received rain for three months and areas that are usually damp and boggy, great for snipe and bitterns, were dry and dusty.

After lunch I was walking past a strand of trees and heard the distinctive alarm call of the cuckoo as it flushed. The trees were so thick I didn't see any movement but Geoff was luckily standing 40m away on the other side and saw it fly past. We searched for it again over the next few days but that was to be our only sighting of **CHESTNUT-WINGED CUCKOO**.



Asian Koel (R.Baxter)

In the afternoon we switched targets. We'd missed the **ASIAN KOEL** on Home Island and late that afternoon went searching for it on West Island. With the group tucked in behind some trees I snuck forward and played the call, hoping it would fly out, not see me and land near the others. It took some enticing but eventually the male landed on a palm frond next to the group allowing some nice close photos. As I walked out I flushed the female which was far more cautious and ducked into another tree, as well as a second male, which wrapped up yet another splendid day!

Post breakfast the following day Ash told us he'd seen an **Oriental Pratincole** on the runway verge. It was chasing grasshoppers that were put up by the lawnmowing. We drove to the site and as we cruised along, out it came, hawking behind the car until it was successful and landed on the tarmac, repeating the process until we'd taken enough photos. Just the single bird stayed until mid January.



Oriental Pratincole (G.Pacey) & Photographing Western Reef Heron (R.Baxter)

Although we'd seen a few light and dark **WESTERN REEF HERONS**, it's always good to find one of the wonderfully distinctive and subtly attractive piebald birds. There are a couple of strangely coloured **Western Reef Herons** on the atoll and we located one at the far end of a bay at low tide, necessitating a walk across the sand flats which proved successful as our target was more interested in chasing fish than worrying about us. What a great way to end a wonderful day in these postcard surroundings.

On our second last day we travelled across the lagoon to Horsburgh Island to see the Northern Pintail that had over-wintered on the atoll, as well as a recently arrived Red-necked Phalarope. After landing and walking across the island, seeing **Buff-banded Rail**, we walked quietly through the trees that surround the lake and quickly found the dainty **RED-NECKED PHALAROPE** with three **Pied Stilt** on the opposite side. A further scan revealed the **NORTHERN PINTAIL** standing uncharacteristically still on top of a dead lagoon-side log.



Northern Pintail (R.Baxter)



Red-necked Phalarope (R.Baxter)

To finish off the trip a sea watch from our accommodation revealed twenty **Masked Booby** and two **Wedge-tailed Shearwater** amongst the hundreds of birds feeding offshore.

And that was it, the end of our hugely successful 14-day photography focused tour, possibly the best in terms of the special target birds seen since 2011. Our trip list included many rare, elusive, localized and stunning species which we all enjoyed.

DECEMBER 2019

Whereas our November tour is primarily focused around photography, December is all about birding, ticking and vagrants. Although most of the group carry nice cameras and lenses and some beautiful photos are taken, the focus is on finding megas and we didn't even wait for the tour to start before we discovered a couple of cripplers.

I stayed on Cocos between tours, as did Tania. We were joined by Biggles who flew in from South East Asia three days early, local birder Geof and Bill Moorhead flew over from Qld to join the fun. By the time the group arrived we'd lined up three cracking rarities in addition to what we'd found last week. A very cryptic and highly sought after **Narcissus Flycatcher**, an aptly-named **Eye-browed Thrush** and an exquisite and rare **Mugimaki Flycatcher**. The flycatchers are two of the most highly desired birds on the Australian birdlist! It was going to be a fun week and we could not wait for sunrise and for the birding to commence.

On our first full morning the group split according to their needs. Most of us travelled to South Island to see **Saunders's Tern** while some that had seen the terns on previous trips opted to search for the thrush and flycatchers, while Biggles, Jenny and Joy caught the ferry to Home Island.



Above: Birding on South Island (Rik Soderlund)

Once again the **Saunders's Terns** were co-operative and we approached close and watched them feeding in the shallows.



Above: Tony, Bruce and Bill photographing Saunders's Tern (Rik Soderlund)

We had breakfast on the uninhabited South Island, opened a coconut, toasted our tern sighting and eventually made our way back across the lagoon to continue birding.

After lunch we were well-rewarded with our first piebald **WESTERN REEF HERON** as we walked across the sandflats to get closer photos. From there we visited the other side of the lagoon and soon found the **JAVAN POND HERON** feeding on the low tide mud flats, where Biggles told us he'd found a **BLUE AND WHITE** 'type' **FLYCATCHER** that morning on Home Island and Jenny had seen the **CHESTNUT-WINGED CUCKOO**. Unfortunately, there was no ferry running on Sunday, so the flycatcher would have to wait till Monday.



Western Reef Heron & Saunders's Tern (R.Baxter)

Sunday was our full day on West Island and we had a lot to chase up. **White-breasted Waterhen**, **Green Junglefowl** and **White Tern** were seen by the entire group and **CHINESE POND HERON** was once again seen feeding on grasshoppers on the runway verge.



Chinese Pond Heron & White-breasted Waterhen (R.Baxter)

We received news that Bill, Bill and Bruce had found a small bird calling in the quarantine station, so we all rushed to the spot where a short search revealed a small but confiding **ARCTIC WARBLER**. The warbler was in the same trees we'd seen Asian Brown Flycatcher last week but there was no sign of it again. Delighted with our success we then went in search of our other targets.



Arctic Warbler (Bill Betts) Above and below



During the day we visited the local wetlands and found **Wood Sandpiper, Grey Teal** and over sixty **Pacific Black Ducks**. The occasional sea watch revealed **Masked Booby, Wedge-tailed Shearwater, Lesser and Greater Frigatebird**, as well as **Brown Booby** and **Red-footed Booby**. One of the cars was fortunate to see **YELLOW BITTERN** which flushed off the beach and flew down the road in front of the car for 200m, before disappearing into the scrub, never to be seen again.

With the tide low we split into groups and walked different sections of the lagoon edge. As we walked the sandy shoreline behind the golf course we flushed an **ORIENTAL CUCKOO** but it was quickly out of sight. After finishing the walk we gathered near the Met Office and one of us walked around the corner to flush the cuckoo again, hopefully we would all get a nice flyby. The plan worked well and the **Oriental Cuckoo** flew into our location, then banked right in front of us and promptly departed. A great addition to the day's tally and what a great way to end off another fabulous day!



Oriental Cuckoo (R.Baxter)

Monday morning soon arrived and our target was the **BLUE AND WHITE FLYCATCHER** Biggles had found on Saturday. We landed on the island at 7am and made our way to Oceania House where we didn't find anything interesting in an hour of searching. We then headed to the spot where the flycatcher was seen. There are at least fifteen huge trees in the area so we searched for an hour but there was no sign of our target.

Quite often the vagrant flycatchers have a route they take each day around the island and once their movement is known, seeing them can be easy. Our best chance was to have an early lunch and be back at the trees at exactly the same time Biggles had seen it two days prior.

After lunch we walked back to the tree and then began the search. A rather worrisome thirty minutes passed and nothing was seen and then it happened and we were all treated to superb views of this stunning and now exceedingly co-operative mega.



Blue and White Flycatcher (Bruce Richardson)



Above: Blue & White Flycatcher (Bill Betts)

The following day we divided between both islands and after a short saunter around Home Island we found a **Black Bittern** and an **ASIAN KOEL**. The majority of the time was spent looking for the Chestnut-winged Cuckoo but there was no sign of it. As we were leaving Jenny found an unusual snipe amongst the houses and we quickly assembled at the location. Several photos were taken but it quickly flushed to the far side of the island and was lost sight of. It certainly wasn't one the normal Pin-tailed Snipe we often find in December and it had several features of Common Snipe but at the time of writing the jury is still out on its ID.



Mystery Snipe (Jenny Spry)

We caught the late morning ferry back to West Island for lunch and an afternoon break. Later that afternoon some of the group visited the wetlands and found a **Baillon's Crake**, only the third record for Cocos. The rest of us spent a relaxing late afternoon on the runway verge watching to see if the Barau's Petrel had returned but it was not to be. Below: Baillon's Crake (G.Pacey)



The following day we travelled across the lagoon to Horsburgh Island to once again see the **Northern Pintail** and **Red-necked Phalarope**. We landed with our dry bags and walked across the open plain, being escorted the entire way by **White Terns**. At the wetlands we quickly saw the **Northern Pintail** before it flew over to the coast but the phalarope put on a great show for us, landing in front of our group for some nice photos.



Red-necked Phalarope (R.Baxter)



Northern Pintail (R.Baxter)

On the way back to the boat we noticed the **White Terns** chasing a small raptor. We quickly got onto it and fortunately it flew close by revealing itself as an awesome little **JAPANESE SPARROWHAWK**.

Seconds later we found a martin which we initially thought was an Asian House Martin but later revealed itself to be **Tree Martin**.



Japanese Sparrowhawk (Bruce Richardson) and (Bill Betts)

While we were on Horsburgh Island the rest of the group had found the **MUGIMAKI FLYCATCHER** on West Island, which had been missing-in-action for most of the week. An early morning pre-breakfast outing resulted in a four hour stake-out with everyone just getting brief glimpses as the small flycatcher fed amongst the thick roadside vegetation.



Waiting for the Mega-maki Flycatcher (Tony Neilson) & Mugimaki Flycatcher (R.Baxter)

Occasionally the **EYE-BROWED THRUSH** would put in an appearance at the flycatcher spot but several people were also seeing it at the original location not far away. We initially thought it was moving between locations but eventually we saw two **Eye-browed Thrush** together.



Mugimaki Flycatcher (R.Baxter)



Eye-browed Thrush (R.Baxter)

The next morning was the last on the islands and proved to be one of the most exciting with the return of the **NARCISSUS FLYCATCHER**. The **EYE-BROWED THRUSH** put in periodic appearances and although elusive, the **MUGIMAKI FLYCATCHER** was eventually seen by everyone as it repeatedly flittered across an opening in the vegetation.

The Narcissus, which was present the entire time, proved decidedly more elusive. There was a cleared track through the forest, enough to drive a car though and the Narcissus would dart across the track, occasionally landing in the open but mostly disappearing into the trees and thick tangle of vines on either side. It was a shy, frustrating and difficult bird to see, with only one in-focus photo taken all week. What an incredible day!



Narcissus Flycatcher (Biggles)



Above: Glen, Tony and Bill (Bill Betts)

That afternoon we flew to Christmas Island.



On our first morning, our main target and quite possibly the top target for the whole tour was the Purple Heron seen three weeks previously in November. More than half the group had been to the island previously and opted to search for the heron, while the remaining few opted to start on the island's endemics and local specialties, with the hope that the others would find the heron and we could drive straight over to see it. Those looking for the heron were eager to set to work and departed early.

It didn't take long and we found a nest building **Island Thrush** on the lawn at our accommodation as well as **Red-footed Booby** and **Great Frigatebird** flying over. Our initial drives into the Christmas Island National Park produced **Red Junglefowl** and **Christmas Island Swiftlet**, while **Christmas Island**

Imperial Pigeon was ubiquitous. Along the coast road to the casino we stopped to watch several **Christmas Frigatebirds** and had nice views of **Brown Booby** along the coast. At each stop we marvelled at the stunning **Golden morph White-tailed Tropicbirds** cruising the skies with the occasional **Lesser Frigatebird** also seen.



Golden White-tailed Tropicbird & CI White-eye (R.Baxter)

With the dry conditions many of the island's tracks were open as the Red Crab migration still hadn't started. With rain predicted I decided to drive the tracks early in the week as it was likely they'd be closed any day. We started with the Winifred Beach Track which we've never driven previously in December. The forest was dry but we had nice views of the local race of **Brown Goshawk**, as well as the gregarious **Christmas Island White-eye** and a nosy **Island Thrush**.



Island Thrush (R.Baxter)

The two teams searching for the heron had been unsuccessful so far. The bird was very skittish and difficult to find for such a large bird but did prefer open areas. Unfortunately, the southern part of the island was littered with numerous current and disused cleared areas, many of which required a walk to reach.

On the third day, as the rain continued to hold off we decided to visit The Dales while the others continued with another day of heron searching. We parked the cars and walked to two dales finding two **Pacific Reef Herons** and two **Striated Heron**. On our way out the monsoon decided to arrive and

we got drenched. To get just that little bit wetter, some of us stood under the waterfall and most took lots of crab photos as Red Crab, Blue Crab, Robber Crab and Purple Crabs were all abundant.



Red Crab and Blue Crab (R.Baxter)

We walked back to the cars and continued our birding. Only one kilometre from the car park, I got a call over the radio from Glen, "Richard, we've just found the heron, we're looking at it now." We couldn't have timed it any better. After three hours out of radio contact down in The Dales, we just happened to be driving past the track that Glen was on when he found it. A quick turn down the side track and we had the **PURPLE HERON** within minutes, with the bonus of an **Oriental Pratincole** and a flyover **Asian Koel**.



Purple Heron (G.Pacey)

With our main target in the bag we celebrated with a nice meal of Chinese that night. There were some very relieved birders in the group as the Purple Heron was the bird many had come to see.

The following day we boarded the boat for an amazing cruise along the coast where we saw thousands of roosting seabirds, snorkelled on the reef and swam with Whale Sharks and Spinner Dolphins. At one stage we had over 200 boobies and frigatebirds following the boat, which made for some great photos. An absolute highlight of our fortnight.



Above & below: Whale Shark and coral reef (R.Baxter)



Red-footed Booby behind the boat (Norton Gill)

The last few days produced nice views of **Java Sparrow** and **Eurasian Tree Sparrow** not far from our accommodation. We also recorded **Red-tailed Tropicbird**, a lone **Lesser Frigatebird**, **Asian Intermediate Egret** and **Striated Heron**, also from islands to the north. Only one **Common Noddy** was seen all week but **White-breasted Waterhen** numbers seem to be increasing on the island with the increased focus on cat eradication.



Photographing Abbott's Booby (G.Pacey)

Once again our December tour had been hugely successful with a great team of birders working together to make a fun and rewarding trip. A special thanks to Tania, Biggles and Glen for helping with on-island logistics.

FUTURE TRIPS

Trip No. 46 - Nov 2020 - 14 days. The best trip for photographers and first timers. \$4500pp Twin.

Trip No. 47 - Dec 2020 - 14 days. Our annual tour for local specialties and vagrants. \$4500pp Twin.

Trip No. 48 - Jan 2021 - 14 days. Our Summer school holidays trip to both islands. \$4500pp Twin.

Trip No. 49 - Nov 2021 - 14 days. The best trip for photographers and first timers. \$4500pp Twin.

Trip No. 50 - Dec 2021 - 14 days. Our annual tour for local specialties and vagrants. \$4500pp Twin.

JANUARY 2020



Asian House Martin (R.Baxter)

The two week January tour started a couple of days after NYE and as was the case with Nov-Dec, some of the rarities were still about, some had departed and new ones had arrived.

We started with a visit to the Q-stn where Ashwin spotted our afternoon's main target in a tree, **JAVAN POND HERON**. It wasn't exactly co-operative and moved into another nearby tree but did sit on top allowing a few photos. Since we first arrived in November it had gained a significant amount of breeding plumage which due to its three year stay, was moving into southern hemisphere timing.



Javan Pond Heron (R.Baxter)

On that first afternoon we also saw numerous **White-breasted Waterhen** as well as a beautiful and showy **Green Junglefowl** and a small flock of **White Tern**. Later that afternoon as we were driving the runway verge we found an **Oriental Pratincole**, an Asian **Intermediate Egret** as well as several **Nankeen Night Herons**.



Green Junglefowl (R.Baxter)

The following morning we were after a species we hadn't seen on Cocos since 2007. We parked only a short drive from our accommodation and spent thirty pre-breakfast minutes watching a lone **ASIAN HOUSE MARTIN** fly up and down the main road, while over twenty **Lesser Frigatebirds** flew overhead, all headed south.

Any day you tick Asian House Martin before breakfast is a good day.



Asian House Martin (R.Baxter)

After an enjoyable morning with the martin, we next parked on the runway verge and walked an area which in the past has been productive for both snipe and bitterns. This year was too dry for bitterns but we flushed two snipe almost immediately after beginning our walk. Fifty meters later we flushed a third snipe. The photos weren't great but were good enough to confirm **PIN-TAILED SNIPE**. The following day we returned to the site and photographed one of the birds again.

At 11am we travelled across to South Island where we quickly located fifteen **SAUNDERS'S TERN** loafing on a sand bar ahead of the incoming tide. We searched through several species of waders but failed to find any Little Stint and managed only distant views of **Common Redshank**, although a loafing **Oriental Pratincole** was some compensation.



Saunders's Tern (R.Baxter)

Monday morning was our first visit to Home Island. Finally, the lush mansion grounds of Home Island beckoned and an early start ensured that we reached this legendary area soon after dawn to maximise our chances of seeing any vagrants and we didn't have to wait long. We snuck quietly into the leafy grounds to see what avian treats it was hiding. Not long after arriving the action started with a flock of at least seven smallish passerines flying across the grounds.

While searching for the smaller birds we located an **ASIAN KOEL**, which uncharacteristically sat still on an exposed branch for us all to see. Delighted with our success we then went in search of our other targets, which didn't take long as we soon identified at least five of the smaller birds as **EYE-BROWED THRUSH**. Paul was walking near the old school house and found a **BLUE ROCK THRUSH**, which despite a couple of hours of searching, failed to re-appear. With the doors to the old school rooms boarded up, I was sure the thrush was sitting in one of the classrooms watching us walk around below. Very frustrating!

Equally frustrating were the occasional sightings of two fast flying grey coloured starling which would blast between trees never allowing views long enough to provide us with a positive ID, although from what we did see I was 99% sure they were the two Purple-backed Starling seen on West Island the previous fortnight.

The search continued and not long after, Donna watched a small bird fly into a tree in the middle of the garden. She radioed the group and we soon had the tree surrounded. It proved elusive and sat motionless in the sub-canopy for thirty minutes but with patience and persistence we finally managed to see this Asian forest gem as it revealed itself with a quick dart through the branches. Ashwin was quick with his camera and his photo revealed a nice little **ASIAN BROWN FLYCATCHER**.

Not everyone had seen it well but with patience we kept track of its movements and it eventually made its way to the thinner foliated far side of the tree where several people took photos and the final couple of people enjoyed nice views.



Asian Brown Flycatcher (R.Baxter) & Eye-browed Thrush (J.Sneddon)

The next morning we returned to Home Island where some of us ventured onto a nearby sandbar seeing **Nankeen Night Herons** and **Eastern Reef Egret** but the absolute highlight was of course watching the long staying **CHINESE POND HERON** which has now adopted Southern Hemisphere timing with its breeding plumage. Incredibly both the Javan and Chinese Pond Herons are now in reverse cycle breeding plumage in December-January. Surely, the only place in the World this can be seen.



Chinese Pond Heron (R.Baxter)

An early morning walk in the farm proved frustrating as we flushed a bird from a low perch and as we walked in the direction it flew, it once again darted into a tree and disappeared. From the description it was probably the Japanese Sparrowhawk which Geof had seen the previous week.

The following morning we walked the adjacent area on foot and luckily the **JAPANESE SPARROWHAWK** proved more co-operative as it flew across the front of our group and then conveniently perched for a short time on an exposed branch.

As we toured the islands we found a nesting **Wedge-tailed Shearwater** near the local surf shack, two lost **Grey Teal** in the wetlands, four **Masked Booby** accompanying a large offshore feeding flock, two **Brown Booby** patrolling the inner lagoon, four flushed **Striated Heron**, a nesting subtly pretty **White-tailed Tropicbird** and a lone **Little Tern** showing off his larger size amongst the smaller **Saunders's Terns**.



Wedge-tailed Shearwater (R.Baxter)



White-tailed Tropicbird (R.Baxter)

On the fifth day our target was the long staying Northern Pintail, which spends its time bouncing between the wetlands on Horsburgh and West Island. We'd visited the West Island site many times during the week with no sign of the target duck. Geof Christie launched his boat and we hopped on board for the 30min picturesque lagoon crossing.

Landing on Horsburgh we quickly found the introduced population of **Christmas White-eye** and were escorted across the island by several welcoming **White Terns**. As we approached the lake we had short views of the endemic **Buff-banded Rail** and quickly spotted the **NORTHERN PINTAIL** which obligingly paddled out into the centre of the small lake allowing a few photos before deciding to fly off towards West Island.



Sue, David, Ashwin and Donna relaxing on Horsburgh Island after seeing the Northern Pintail
(R.Baxter)

The long staying **ORIENTAL CUCKOO** which preferred to eat grubs in the small coastal bushes was seen four times and three **ASIAN KOEL** provided nice views at the farm for those that put in the time. Donna and Ash located a **White-throated Needletail** whilst on a late afternoon stakeout, as well as two **Dollarbirds**.

Over the last two days we continued to see the **Asian House Martin** and had regular views of **Western Reef Heron**. We used the last two days to target species some of the group had missed and many opted to get better photos of some of the more co-operative species. On the final day much of the group's discussion was focused on a mega rarity that had arrived on Christmas Island in the last week.

A couple of visiting birders from Asia had found and photographed two Northern Boobook (Brown Hawk Owl) in the forest. It would be a new bird for all the group except me. After an excellent week on Cocos it was soon time to board the Virgin flight and find out if they were still there.

Christmas Island

The first two days were spent finding the island's endemics as we slowly made our way around the island's tracks and roads that were still open with the approaching Red Crab migration. The island had finally received much needed rain and it had got the crabs moving. Around Settlement we saw **Java Sparrow**, **Island Thrush**, **Eurasian Tree Sparrow** and **Red-tailed Tropicbird**.



Java Sparrow (R.Baxter)



Island Thrush & male Great Frigatebird (R.Baxter)

Along the shore terraces we stopped to spend some quality time with roosting **Brown Booby**, perched **Red-footed Booby**, soaring **Great and Christmas Frigatebirds** as well as occasional sightings of **Nankeen Kestrel** and migratory **Peregrine Falcon**.



Red-footed Booby (R.Baxter)

The forest around town produced a sentinel **CI Brown Goshawk** watching intently from an overhanging **branch** and **Christmas Island Swiftlet**. These forests have just a few species occupying every niche with **CI White-eye** clambering along the stems and branches of trees and **CI Imperial Pigeon** enjoying the fruit in the canopy.



Christmas Island Brown Goshawk (R.Baxter)

Deeper in the forest we had superb flight and perched views of **Abbott's Booby** as well as **Common Emerald Dove** along the rainforest tracks, while stopping occasionally to photograph Robber Crabs.



Common Emerald Dove (G.Pacey) & Abbott's Booby (R.Baxter)

During the day I received a call from Lisa with the news that someone had found a Grey Nightjar sitting in the middle of the road. We drove down to the Kampong where Tania from Parks Australia had it in a box, minus its tail. It may have lost its tail to a Christmas Boobook but more likely it had been grabbed by a frigatebird, which is what they typically do to seabirds they harass. Either way it won't be returning to the Northern Asia anytime soon.



Grey Nightjar (R.Baxter)

It was soon time to head out into the forest to search for Northern Boobook. After dinner we drove to the area where they were seen nine days previously and drove several kilometres of tracks using our spotlights, without success. We regrouped and decided to play the call. The area was large and migrating birds are typically unresponsive to playback, so I wasn't expecting a result. I played the call and within twenty seconds an owl flew into the tree above us. We'd all seen it but it almost immediately departed to a taller dead tree down the road. Ashwin and Donna ran after it and saw it again perched on a dead branch. They yelled to the rest of us, "**NORTHERN BOOBOOK!**". Over the next few minutes it flew overhead and perched another three times before departing. It never sat exposed long enough for a photo but everyone in the group saw what is one of Australia's most highly sought after species.

Later in the week we again headed into the night for the last of the island's endemics. It took a while to coerce our target closer but eventually we had great views of **Christmas Boobook**.

David and Sue spotted what was possibly a Greenish Warbler at the Golf Course and then a few days later a possible Yellow-browed Warbler but both times the bird disappeared into the forest amongst the hundreds of White-eyes and were frustratingly not seen again.

With only one day to go Glen decided to walk through a grassy area which on a normal year is wet and boggy but this year was bone dry. On the edge of the area he flushed a **RED-LEGGED CRAKE** which flew into nearby bushes. Despite a search and an early morning stakeout, it was not seen again.

With fifteen rarities, all the endemics and superb views of the local specialties, it had been a great fortnight of birding. Thanks must go to a wonderful group of enthusiastic, skilled and fun participants.

FUTURE TRIPS

Trip No. 46 - Nov 2020 - 14 days. The best trip for photographers and first timers. \$4500pp Twin.
Trip No. 47 - Dec 2020 - 14 days. Our annual tour for local specialties and vagrants. \$4500pp Twin.
Trip No. 48 - Jan 2021 - 14 days. Our Summer school holidays trip to both islands. \$4500pp Twin.
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SHORT JANUARY TOUR

Following directly on from our usual two week January tour we started our short eight day version. We had half the amount of time to see all the Christmas Island endemics and specialties as well as search for vagrants on both islands.



Christmas Island Imperial Pigeon (R.Baxter)

The main benefit of the late January trip is that I've been birding both islands for the last 2.5 months and have most species nailed down. This proved invaluable as we easily found our targets on both islands as well as a few highly sought after rarities.

On our first day the local endemics came thick and fast as we drove across and around the island. **Island Thush**, **Common Emerald Dove**, **Abbott's Booby** and **Christmas Island White-eye** were seen early, followed by **Christmas Island Imperial Pigeon**, **Red Junglefowl** and **Brown Goshawk**. We'd spent the morning walking to the spot we'd last seen the Purple Heron but it was not found.



Christmas Island's Brown Goshawk & Pin-tailed Snipe (R.Baxter)

The following two days began with early morning views of **Java Sparrow** and **Brown Booby**, followed by a short session trying to photograph the fast flying **Christmas Island Swiftlet**. Later in the day we found a **PIN-TAILED SNIPE** feeding on a section of mowed grass and a nominate race **Intermediate Egret** from South East Asia, a species which has been split by Birdlife International.



Intermediate Egret and Great Egret (R.Baxter)



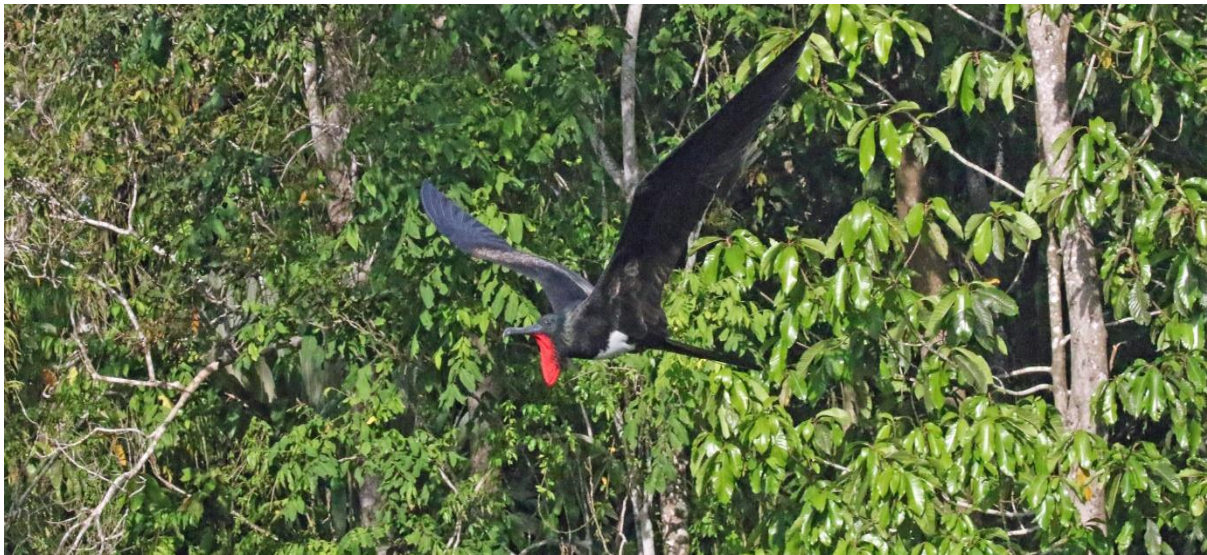
Christmas Island Swiftlet (R.Baxter)

At one of the island's lookouts we took the time to photograph the magnificent golden morph **White-tailed Tropicbird**. A bird one never tires of seeing. Accompanying these were **Red-footed Booby** and several male **Greater Frigates**.



Above: Andrew, Greg and Judy above Flying Fish Cove (R.Baxter)

Along the coastline we stopped for close-up views of roosting **Brown Booby** and perched **Red-footed Booby**. We visited the island's largest **Christmas Island Frigatebird** colony where lots of photos were taken as hundreds of birds soared overhead, including a fast flying **Peregrine Falcon**. Further along the coast I flushed a **YELLOW BITTERN** from the ocean side scrub and after a quick scramble down the hill managed to entice it to fly back to its original position.



Male Christmas Frigatebird (R.Baxter)

While exploring the island we had good views of **White-breasted Waterhen** and **Eurasian Tree Sparrow**, before finishing the day off with nice views of **Christmas Boobook**.

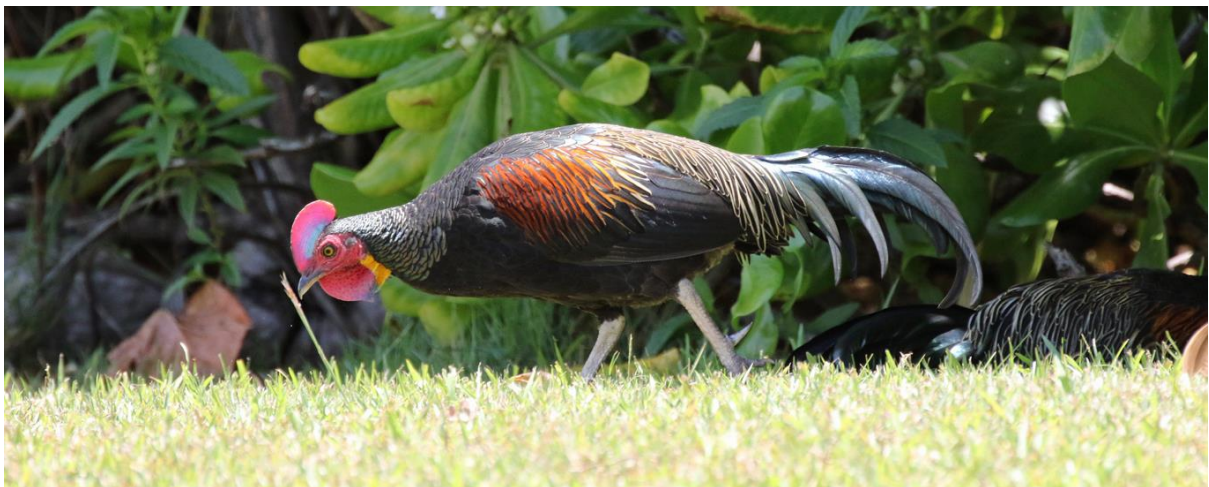
Fortunately, we were on the island for the annual Red Crab spawning. We set our alarms for a 3.30am start and walked to the cove to witness the incredible spectacle of thousands of crabs depositing their eggs in the sea. The entire coast was covered in crabs as they jostled their way across the sand and rocks to the ocean, where once finished they began their long walk back up the hill into the forest.



Red Crabs (R.Baxter)

That afternoon we were exploring the southern end of the island and in overcast rainy conditions drove slowly down a little-used track still hoping to find the elusive heron. As we turned a corner a spectacular **SLATY-BREASTED RAIL** flushed from the long roadside grass in front of the car and flew at right angles into the forest. Only Greg and I on the driver's side of the car saw it. During subsequent dawn and dusk searches I failed to re-find what is a shy, secretive bird.

The following day we flew to Cocos where our list of rarities continued to grow.



Green Junglefowl (R.Baxter)

After checking in to our accommodation and picking up some groceries for the next three days we headed out for a short drive to see the exceptionally attractive **Green Junglefowl** as well as **White Terns** and usually conspicuous but often elusive **White-breasted Waterhen**.

The following day we ventured across to South Island to see **SAUNDERS'S TERN**. The tide worked in our favour and the birds were relaxed, allowing us a close approach. Having found them so quickly we were therefore able to really enjoy them and have time to photograph this diminutive tern which had been joined by two larger **Little Terns**.



Above: White Tern (R.Baxter)

That afternoon we had nice views of two **WESTERN REEF HERON** feeding on the mudflats of the inner lagoon. Our late afternoon target was Asian Koel. After driving to the farm we parked and waited while two **Dollarbirds** gracefully and actively hawked for insects between two large trees with their typical laboured wingbeats. It didn't take long and the female **ASIAN KOEL** flew from the banana plantation into one of the trees in front of us. She was typically shy but we all managed to see her as she moved around in the tree.

Our final target was the breeding plumaged **CHINESE POND HERON** which prefers to hang out well away from people on the remote sand bars and mud flats of the inner lagoon. In rainy and overcast conditions we began our walk and soon found our target on a distant sandspit. As we approached the skies cleared, the sun came out and the pond heron flew directly across the bay in front of us. We snapped a few photos, the bird disappeared and it started to rain again. Perfect timing !



Chinese Pond Heron (R.Baxter)



White-breasted Waterhen and White-winged Tern (R.Baxter)

Whilst the focus of the tour was certainly the rich assemblage of vagrants, we did not neglect the frequent photographic opportunities and the prized avian local endemics and specialties that these islands are famous for.

It had been a most memorable summer and would not have been possible without such a wonderful group of enthusiastic and experienced participants and an excellent ground operations team. Thank you very much to everyone! I am greatly looking forward to sharing many more wonderful adventures with all of you!



I wonder what will turn up next summer from over the horizon? (G.Pacey)

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