

# Christmas Island and Cocos Keeling Islands trip report

## Summer 2016-17

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Our three trips this summer (Nov, Dec & Feb) took us from the rugged limestone cliffs, shore terraces and magnificent rainforest of Christmas Island to the expansive turquoise blue of the Cocos lagoon, giving us a thorough coverage of both islands. We had unbelievable views of all the island's endemics and local specialties as well as the highly sought-after regular migrants and a record haul of exquisite and rare vagrants. All in all, they were thoroughly enjoyable tours with great birding and great company.

The **November** tour began on Christmas Island and we quickly started to work our way through the exceptional list of seabirds these islands are famous for. As one participant stated during the tour this year, "it's taken me thirty years of birding to see all Australia's boobies, tropicbirds and frigatebirds and now I've seen them all in just four days".

**White-tailed Tropicbirds, Christmas Island & Great Frigatebirds** soared above our accommodation, while **Red-footed & Brown Booby** cruised the nearby shore terraces. A real bonus was a pair of golden morph White-tailed Tropicbirds nesting in the cliffs adjacent to our accommodation. Needless to say, the photographic opportunities were fabulous!

Our first two days were spent around town as well as a late afternoon on the island's plateau where we had great views of the distinctive **Abbott's Booby** (below) as well as **Island Thrush** and **Christmas Island White-eye**.





(Island Thrush) (R.Baxter)



Glossy Swiftlets (R.Baxter)

Travelling around the Settlement, airport and town areas we encountered a few **Red Junglefowl**, **Common Emerald Dove**, **Christmas Island Imperial Pigeon** and of course thousands of **Glossy Swiftlets**.



Out birding (Jenny Spry & Jill Harvey)

During days three and four on the island we traversed several of the island's roads and forest tracks, quickly finding the Asian race of **Intermediate Egret**, an insurance tick for the group, as well as **Tree Sparrow**, **Barn Swallow** and **Brown (Christmas Island) Goshawk**.

The most sought after bird of day four was Grey Wagtail and we found ourselves at a local park where we were entertained by great views of three **GREY WAGTAIL** showing well and happily sitting on the fence and overhead wires for the entire group to view.

The following morning's target was the often difficult to connect with **Java Sparrow**. We spread out over three sites and eventually had cracking views of this most impressive local specialty. Delighted with this, we set off to continue our hunt for the often vocal but uncooperative **ASIAN KOEL**. Despite plenty of searching only a couple of people saw this species. While searching for the Koel, Biggles located a small flock of swifts and we quickly assembled near the post office. There was possibly a 'nest type' swiftlet amongst the flock but we couldn't relocate it, eventually identifying **Pacific Swifts** and **White-throated Needletails**.



Group photos (Jill Harvey's camera)





Java Sparrow and Tree Sparrow (John Donkin)

Several of us took a cruise along the island's protected northern coastline, snorkelling and photographing the local seabirds. As is always the case with these tours we have birders with varying levels of enthusiasm as well as non-birding partners. None of the activities are compulsory and often when we we're out birding, members of the group engage in activities such as sightseeing, swimming, golf, shopping or learning about the rich history and culture of the islands, as well as, of course, relaxing.



With only three days remaining on the island, surprisingly we still hadn't had close views of **Red-tailed Tropicbird**. With this in mind we spent the next morning searching the coastal strip for a species which is usually rather straight forward to see. After an unsuccessful session near the cove we eventually hit the jackpot along the cliffs near Rocky Point where we spent nearly an hour with several birds, some of which soared only metres above our heads.

Several members of the group spent many hours during the days searching for the **RED-BILLED TROPICBIRD** seen only a week prior and photographed in June. A couple of our group managed to see this bird after many hours of scanning the coastline.

After lunch we flushed one of the migratory East Asian forms of **Striated Heron** and a search of the South Point area revealed a couple of **Oriental Pratincoles**. On the way back into town an open roadside area yielded views of **Dollarbird race calonyx**, which breeds in Northern Asia and migrates south through Thailand and Sumatra into the Greater Sundas.

After an early dinner we grabbed our spotlights and headed into the forest in search of our last remaining Christmas Island endemic. We quickly found our quarry not far from our accommodation and all enjoyed a magical moment as two obliging **Christmas Boobooks** put on a superb show for us. What a great way to end another fabulous day!

Real features of these islands are the incredible landscapes and breathtaking natural beauty and when these are combined with some of Australia's most prized avian specialties, blend beautifully, creating unique photography moments. We always allow some flexibility to take advantage of these photographic opportunities we encounter while traversing the islands, allowing the group's photographers to get the best shot possible. During the week we revisited many sites when the light was good to photograph roosting seabirds and rainforest species as well as the all-important 'must have' flight shots of the golden morph White-tailed Tropicbird.



Christmas Boobook (Bob Harvey)



Grey Wagtail (Karen Donkin)

The week was drawing to an end but we still had a few of the migrant hotspots to visit in the hope of adding new species to our ever growing list and after breakfast we headed off with an action-packed day ahead of us.

We assembled at LB3 and walked through an open grassy area flushing a very cryptic **SWINHOE'S SNIPE** which departed never to be seen again. Following this spectacle we made our way to the other side of the road where we flushed a **YELLOW BITTERN** from only metres in front of us and as it took flight, a large female CI Goshawk swooped down and grabbed it in mid-air. With the bittern dangling and shrieking in the goshawk's talons



they both crashed into the nearby marsh. The following day we drove past the wetlands and the Yellow Bittern flew from the same spot we had last seen it the day before. It had somehow survived.



Swinhoe's Snipe (R.Baxter)



Red-tailed Tropicbird (Bob Harvey)

Later that afternoon a few of our group managed to locate a **Peregrine Falcon** soaring along one of the island's ridge lines. This bird was a small male of one of the rare migratory races of peregrine, either *japonensis* or *calidus* which travel down from the Arctic leapfrogging other peregrine ssp along the way. This sighting wrapped up yet another splendid day and our final full day on the island prior to our departure to Cocos.



Peregrine Falcon (Jenny Spry)



Striated Heron (Bob Harvey)

We arrived on Cocos late afternoon and took a short drive to the northern end of the island seeing **Green Junglefowl** and numerous **White-breasted Waterhen**, before returning for our first evening meal on Cocos.

Green Junglefowl



Our first full day started with brief views of **EURASIAN TEAL** at the island's wetlands, followed by **WESTERN REEF HERON** at a nearby waterhole. **White Terns** were common, as were Nankeen Night Herons and Eastern Reef Egrets as we made our way around the island. After visiting a couple more wetlands, we opted for a drive along the runway in search two target vagrants.

The first spot we stopped we flushed two **PIN-TAILED SNIPE** which decamped into the lagoon-side undergrowth.



Pin-tailed Snipe (Richard Baxter)

From here we made our way further along the runway verge in search of one of the most highly desired birds on the Australian list, Schrenck's Bittern. It is a particularly unusual and mysterious species with a secretive nature. With adrenalin pumping we parked 500m away and set off in search of our quarry, reaching our final stop behind a large bush in good time. After a short wait some of us were a bit anxious but as a group we moved out into the open and within 20m a **VON SCHRENCK'S BITTERN** flushed from beside a small shrub. A few of us managed to snap off a couple of flight photos.

Schrenck's Bittern flushed from the runway verge (R.Baxter)



After lunch we caught the ferry to Home Island where we saw a very cryptic **CHINESE SPARROWHAWK** as well as numerous White Terns.



The West Island wetlands have continued to surprise us for over a decade and every time we venture in, there is the hope of a new vagrant, particularly during migration time. With this in mind we visited the wetlands every day. The next day was to prove one of those days. We all sat scanning with scopes and binos, when a smaller duck was spotted loafing on the far shore amongst the Pacific Black Duck. After a while it moved out into the water showing its long pointed tail and revealing itself as a **NORTHERN PINTAIL**.



Northern Pintail (G.Christie)



Intermediate Egret (Jenny Spry)

The following day was one of the best of the trip with an early morning viewing of **BROWN SHRIKE**, which was a new OZ bird for everyone on the trip and one I had personally long waited to see. They were indeed soul satisfying views. Later that morning we found a **Schrenck's Bittern** standing on the roadside verge near the rubbish tip. This was one of those incredible Cocos birding events where tired birds that have just arrived on the island stand on the grass roadside verge and allow nice views.



Brown Shrike (Jenny Spry)



(Damian Baxter)



Schrenck's on the road side(Geof Christie)



Oriental Pratincole ( Bob Harvey )

It had been an exceptional morning so far but there was still more to come. That afternoon we headed over to South Island where we had six **SAUNDERS'S TERNS** and a brief view of a **EURASIAN CURLEW** just before its sandbar was covered by the incoming tide and it flew. Tearing ourselves away from the terns we headed to a private beach around the corner where our hosts had prepared a delicious lunch for us with the obligatory champagne to celebrate our Saunders's Terns. Lunch was followed by a relaxing swim in warm shallow lagoon waters. What a great way to end a wonderful day in these postcard surroundings.



Above (Jill Harvey)



With the previous day's impressive haul in mind we set off to Home Island in search of the Chinese Pond Heron which has been resident near the island for the last three years. We crossed a shallow area of lagoon and skirted around the edge of a small coral island sneaking up to the area it's regularly seen. As we turned the corner the **CHINESE POND HERON** flushed and gave our group some nice flight views in near full breeding plumage.

Our group positioned themselves behind some palm trees while I set off to walk along the beach front in an attempt to flush it back towards the inner lagoon and past our group. As I walked along a channel leading to the ocean a flash of iridescent blue darted out of a coastal shrub in front of me and landed on a rock overhanging a nearby rock pool....WOW ...**COMMON (Eurasian) KINGFISHER**. What a cracking bird to find. Over the next few days we returned to the rock pool and managed a few nice photos.





Common Kingfisher (Jenny Spry)

The following day we caught the ferry to Home Island where we found 21 **Barn Swallows** near the garbage tip and the local endemic ssp of **Buff-banded Rail** which although quite skulking allowed some nice photos to be taken of what is a highly sought-after endemic sub species.

We continued to revisit many of the migrant hotspots on West Island, including an area at the end of the runway where seven **Oriental Pratincole** had been showing well all week. Driving from the pratincoles over to the wetlands one day we were stopped by local birder Geof Christie who told us of a **non-breeding pond heron** nearby that he had just seen. We headed over to the area and found the bird in an open field re-fuelling on grasshoppers.

We took some nice photos and continued to see this bird daily until the end of our stay. We're now hoping it hangs around until the Feb tour when it will start to show some breeding plumage and identification will be possible. While we watched it feed, some people in the group were hoping it would turn out to be Chinese, most wanted Javan and my pick was Indian. Only time will tell.

Our highly successful trip was coming to an end. We only had one and a half days remaining but that time would still provide yet another two exquisite and rare vagrants.



Buff-banded Rail race *andrewsi* (Bob Harvey)



Non breeding pond heron ssp (R.Baxter)



Group photos (Jill Harvey)

Late afternoon and we had all returned to our ocean front accommodation while Glen Pacey decided to take one last drive back along the coast. He returned telling us he had just seen a small flycatcher in some coastal trees at the other end of the island. In the fading light he was unable to identify it but our group now had a target for early the next morning.

That evening we enjoyed another nice dinner at the local restaurant whilst reminiscing over yet another great day's birding. The next morning after an early breakfast, excitement mounted as we headed off to search for the mystery flycatcher. We spread out and began the search. A rather worrisome thirty minutes passed and nothing yet, but we did enjoy close views of roosting White Tern and then it happened, movement in the canopy, then it flew out and landed on a branch for us all to see. Stellar perched views of **ASIAN BROWN FLYCATCHER** as it fluttered from branch to branch and even called a few times.



Asian Brown Flycatcher (R.Baxter)





Keith, Karen, Terri, Glen and Jenny (Jill Harvey).

Our final full day on the island had come to an end and we drove out to the southern end of West Island for our final night beach dinner. Superbly prepared by Ash & Kylie James, we spent the night seated under the stars on a secluded beach next to the lagoon and reminisced over what had been a spectacular fortnight of birding. During the three courses there were a few toasts, some great stories and several speeches. Over the fortnight we'd seen an incredible eighteen vagrants and a few people in the group had passed some significant birding milestones. It was a great night but we still had a few hours birding before we had to board our flight to Perth and there was still one final morning bonus bird to come.



Cocos Sunset and our final night beach dinner (Jill Harvey)



Rosy Starling (Geof Christie)

On our final morning of the tour Geof Christie flushed a young Rosy Starling from near the Cocos Golf Course. We spread out and searched the area for over an hour. It was eventually seen by eight members of the group in bushes at the southern end of the runway and was gone again by the time others arrived. A cracking bird to end the tour with.



Group photos (Jill Harvey)

Our list of vagrants included some real gems like Brown Shrike, Swinhoe's Snipe, Schrenck's Bittern, Red-billed Tropicbird, Yellow Bittern, Rosy Starling, Chinese Pond Heron, Eurasian Curlew, Common Kingfisher, Northern Pintail, Eurasian Teal, Pin-tailed Snipe and Grey Wagtail. All these, coupled with a great bunch of birders made for a wonderful time on the two islands.



Tree Pipit (Richard Baxter)

The **December** tour started with a week on Cocos and was followed by a further week on Christmas Island. It had been four days between tours and in that short period of time one astonishing mega rarity had arrived on Home Island, Square-tailed Drongo Cuckoo !

With the inter-island ferry schedule against us we had to wait until Monday for the next ferry across the lagoon. We all had our fingers crossed that the bird would continue its Cocos vacation for at least another two days. With an early arrival from Perth we had most of the weekend to explore West Island. **Green Junglefowl** and **White-breasted Waterhen** were once again plentiful and a stop at the local wetlands produced the resident **COMMON (EURASIAN) TEAL** and **Nankeen Night Heron** but no sign of the pintail.

After lunch we began to explore further afield and re-found the non-breeding **pond heron** near the sewage works as well as five **Oriental Pratincole**, several **Wedge-tailed Shearwaters** and nine **PIN-TAILED SNIPE**. The highlight of the day was a remarkable show put on by no less than three **YELLOW BITTERNs** on the edge of the lagoon. As we drove along the lagoon shoreline a single Yellow Bittern was spotted standing uncharacteristically still in the open. We stopped and started taking photos, when an older bird was spotted loitering not far away on an adjacent bank. As we watched, the older bird flew in and attacked the closer bird. After a short shoreline scrimmage they departed, flushing a third bird from the nearby long grass. What an awesome start to the trip, which set the tone for what proved to be an immensely successful time on Cocos.





Yellow Bittern (Rob Shore)

Sunday was our first full day on the island and by day's end we had accrued a dazzling list of notable sightings and remarkable encounters. Foremost amongst these was the encounter that Sue Taylor and James Mustafa had when returning from the wetlands for lunch. As they drove across the farm they watched a **SQUARE-TAILED DRONGO CUCKOO** fly into a tall tree nearby. After a few quick photos they summoned the rest of the group but we couldn't re-find the bird. A look at the photos showed that it wasn't the same bird that was on Home Island. Astonishingly, there were two Drongo Cuckoos !



Group (Irena Earl)



Damian, Mike, Sue, Glen and Pacific Swift (J. Mustafa)

Apart from Drongo Cuckoo, our second day's improbable haul included:

**VON SCHRENCK'S BITTERN**

**WESTERN REEF HERON**

**ASIAN KOEL**

**ASIAN BROWN FLYCATCHER**

**BROWN SHRIKE.** and two **ROSY STARLING !**



Monday morning had finally arrived and on this morning our main target and quite possibly the top target for the whole tour was now within reach. **Drongo Cuckoo** was a new bird for everyone on the trip and was now only a short ferry ride away. We all ventured across the lagoon to Home Island and within thirty minutes all had seen this astounding rarity. It sat out in the open for some time while we admired it and enjoyed most memorable close-up encounters with the handsome rarity.....a magical sight! For the next few days we had the privilege of spending time with it on every visit to the island.



Square-tailed Drongo Cuckoo (D.Baxter)

Delighted with our success we then went in search of our other targets and it wasn't long before we had the first of many fly-over views of **CHINESE SPARROWHAWK**. A brief walk to the northern end of the island produced a flock of **Barn Swallows** and a stop at the local shop for some well-deserved ice-blocks to celebrate the morning's success.

Late that afternoon after a few hours of tactical surveillance in the grounds of Oceania House one of our group saw a brief movement in the canopy of a large tree. The rest of us joined in and we soon had two small cryptic flycatchers obscured in the thick canopy. One



bird had flashes of blue in the wing and the other was yellow/orange in colour. With the tree surrounded and cameras poised we quickly found a lovely **BLUE & WHITE FLYCATCHER** which eventually descended lower in the tree, showing nicely before absconding deeper into the foliage and out of view.

What followed next was without doubt the biggest dip of the tour. Those of us that had seen Blue & white Fly previously focused our efforts on the other yellow/orange bird. It stayed deeper in the thick canopy and although several of us had obtained enough glimpses to say it was a Yellow-rumped/Narcissus type Flycatcher, it quickly evaporated into thin air, never to be identified and to remain as a slashbird. We were certainly not disappointed as we continued our run of great sightings, with the best still yet to come.



Blue & White Flycatcher (Robert Shore)



Eurasian Teal (Irena Earl)

The next two days our group split up with some people staying on Home Island while the majority of the group stayed on West Island. On West Island we visited many of the island's birding hot spots and gained increasingly better views and some nice photos of species we'd seen over the first three days.

For the group on Home Island the lush mansion grounds beckoned and an early start ensured that they were in this well-known birding area soon after dawn to maximise the chances of finding any vagrants. The approach was successful as they hit the jackpot and found a very unexpected juvenile **BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT HERON** as well as an elusive **EYE-BROWED THRUSH**. We'd seen this thrush species previously on Cocos and it had been accommodating in the past but this bird was shy, frustrating and uncooperative!

With news of the BCNH the entire group assembled early next morning on Home Island and eventually, we'd all seen this much sought-after mega. It's crepuscular nature allowed us to plan for its arrival and subsequently observe it's behaviour.

It was more hunched than the abundant local Nankeen Night Herons, with more deliberate and cryptic movements. Its plumage was a darker brown/blackish tone, with entirely dull grey primaries. The darker iris and elongated streaks on the wing coverts combined with the above were enough to confirm this bird as Australia's fourth Black-crowned Night Heron and the first ever seen by a group of birders.



Black-crowned Night Heron (Damian Baxter)



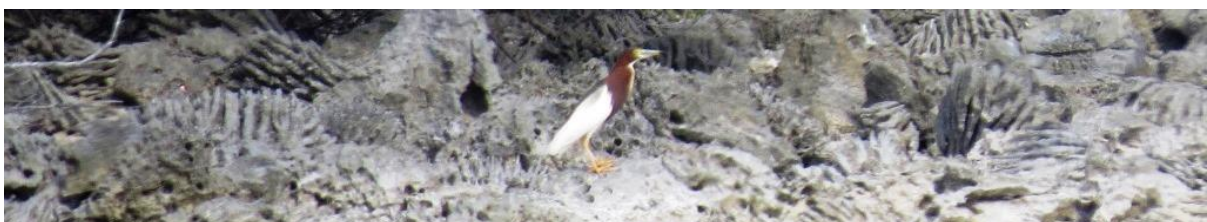
Eye-browed Thrush (Rob Shore )



Black-crowned Night Heron (Damian Baxter)

During the day we had further views of the thrush, located another Blue & White Flycatcher and once again had views of the Chinese Sparrowhawk soaring over the mansion grounds. Mike Carter went for a stroll along the lagoon edge and found a **Javan Pond Heron** which we were unable to relocate.

Some of us did a lagoon walk and saw the long staying **CHINESE POND HERON**, while others opted to search the house grounds for the orange/yellow flycatcher. We finished the day at the local Malay restaurant and caught the late ferry back to West Island.



Chinese Pond Heron (James Mustafa)





The long staying Chinese Pond Heron (Robert Shore)

Day six was our trip to South Island where we located 15 **SAUNDERS'S TERN** and a **EURASIAN CURLEW**. Great views of the terns were complimented by some tasty lunch, before we made our way into the water for an enjoyable swim. We finished the day at the local restaurant on West Island.



Searching for Saunders's (James Mustafa)



Saunders's Tern (Hedley Earl)



Saunders's Tern (James Mustafa)



South Island (David Koffel)

Post breakfast on our final day on Cocos produced one of the most mind blowing vagrants ever found in Australia.....**TREE PIPIT**. A Western Palearctic long distant migrant that's main wintering grounds are sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and India. This was certainly not a species we ever expected to find on these islands.

We were birding the southern end of the runway early morning and Robert Shore decided to catch the ferry to Home Island to do some photography. Damian and Rob set off for the jetty and a couple of minutes later came rushing back, having just found a pipit at the northern end of the runway. We all soon located the confiding bird, which happily stayed on the grass track, where for the next hour we were all treated to superb views of this astounding mouth-watering mega. This individual permitted us to approach to within only a few metres allowing amazing photographic opportunities. Incredible birding indeed!



Tree Pipit (Richard Baxter)



Tree Pipit (Rob Shore)

After enjoying our time with this spectacular species, we returned for breakfast, looked at our photos and well pleased with our morning's sighting we headed off for another attempt at the pintail. We did finally manage to come up trumps with great views of **NORTHERN PINTAIL** followed by a quick trip to Home Island which produced three **Chinese Sparrowhawks** simultaneously circling overhead.





Group (James Mustafa and Warwick Remington)

After seven days on Cocos it was time to fly to Christmas Island where an entire new suite of birds were waiting.



We finished dropping our luggage off at our motel and grabbed a quick lunch before commencing a bit of local birding. A few people in the group had been on my tour before and they headed off to check a couple of local hotspots while I began the search for the local endemics with the rest of the group. Before long we had seen **Island Thrush**, **Glossy Swiftlet**, **Brown (CI) Goshawk**, **Christmas Island White-eye** and a tree full of **Christmas Island Imperial Pigeon**, as the sky blackened ahead of an afternoon tropical downpour.



Christmas Island Imperial Pigeon (Richard Baxter)

Our travels on the first day also produced **Red Junglefowl**, both **White and Red-tailed Tropicbirds**, **Red-footed** and **Brown Booby**, **Greater** and **Christmas Island Frigatebird**, **Asian Intermediate Egret**, **Asian Striated Heron** and a small flock of **Barn Swallow**.

Despite the impressive first day's haul of special birds, there were still a couple of exceptional species yet to come later in the afternoon. Once the weather cleared we headed to the hidden farm where as we walked the paths a **JAPANESE SPARROWHAWK** flew over our heads and landed in a large tree on a nearby hill. We managed a few ID photos before it departed but we relocated the same bird on another three afternoon visits to the area later in the week.

When the wind on Christmas Island blows from the north at a certain time of year and at the correct time of day, there is only one place to be....Swift Alley. In the past we have had our major swift activity in November but this year we had southerly winds all week on the previous tour and no vagrant swifts were seen.

We headed out to the site and began searching for migratory swifts, martins or swiftlets while also taking advantage of several **Abbott's Booby** nesting in nearby trees and returning from feeding forays around the island. The booby provided some nice photographic opportunities as they cruised slowly overhead and circled prior to landing.

After about forty minutes of waiting a lone **ASIAN HOUSE MARTIN** cruised overhead and spent the rest of the afternoon in the vicinity. This was the first time we had recorded this species on the island since 2011. We were happy with our house martin sighting and it was forecast to continue to blow from the north for another few days. We would return again.



Asian House Martin (D.Baxter)

The next day we started early and headed up to Drumsite where we saw twenty **Java Sparrow** and a confiding **GREY WAGTAIL**. Not a bad pre-breakfast combination. During the day we located a lone **Oriental Pratincole**, several **Tree Sparrow** and a **Peregrine Falcon** visiting from Northern Asia.



After a pleasant day's birding it was once again time to visit Swift Alley. There was more activity than the previous day and we soon located two Asian House Martin as well as **Pacific Swifts** and occasionally another swift would appear from behind the hill to keep us on our toes.

Progressively over the next hour we established this other swift was 'all dark' and had a different flight style to the Pacific Swifts. Realising this, the entire group's attention was now on this bird, which we thought could be Dark-rumped Swift. After a while it moved from behind the hill into more open space and allowed several photos to be taken of what was Australia's first ever record of **COMMON SWIFT**.

This astonishing transcontinental crippler winters exclusively in Equatorial and Sub-Equatorial Africa, making it one of the finest birds we've ever found on these tours and surprisingly yet another Western Palearctic migrant.



Common Swift (R.Baxter)



Common swift (Damian Baxter)

Over the next couple of days we ventured further into the local rainforest, which in my opinion, is close to the best Australia has. Several **Common Emerald Dove** and a few **White-breasted Waterhen** were seen during our drives, as were **White-throated Needletails** and **Common Noddy**.



White-breasted Waterhen (Warwick Remington)





Christmas Island rainforest (R.Baxter)



Casino Lookout (Irena Earl)



Swift Alley (James Mustafa)



Flycatcher watch (Irena Earl)

Over the next couple of nights we concentrated on finding the local boobook and searched for migratory nightjars. James located a **SAVANNA NIGHTJAR** near the casino, which conveniently flew around above his head calling. Soon the rest of the group were at the location and the nightjar sat somewhere in the nearby forest making its distinctive call but not showing itself again.

We also had two nights on the island's plateau where the entire group saw **GREY NIGHTJAR** and another night with close encounters with the local **Christmas Boobook**.



Red Crab with leaf umbrella (R.Baxter)



Christmas Island White-eye (R.Baxter)



During our time in the beautiful and dense rainforest we drove the tracks and adjacent trails that crisscross the island and eventually our search efforts yielded one of the coolest birds of the trip. **MALAY NIGHT HERON** are notoriously shy and elusive and this one was no exception, but with patience and persistence we finally managed to see this forest gem along the Blowholes Track.

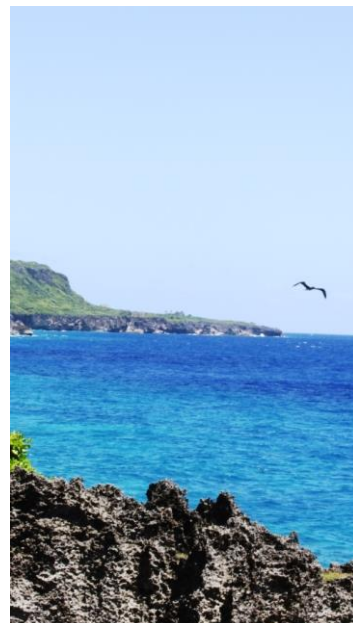


Malay Night Heron (Damian Baxter)

**ASIAN KOEL** continued to be difficult but after a few failed attempts we eventually had cracking views of three males before breakfast on the second last morning.



Asian Koel (Damian Baxter)



Christmas Island coastline (R.Baxter)

With four days to go we had broken the record for the most number of rarities ever seen on one of these tours. Despite so far finding thirty vagrants in two weeks, we still had another breathtaking crippler to come. With Tree Pipit, Drongo Cuckoo and Common Swift on the trip list, it would have to be something extraordinary to trump either of those birds as the 'bird of the trip' but the following day we found, what was for many, the best bird so far.

We'd decided to line up and walk through the grass covering an old mine site in search of snipe. After traveling only 15m we flushed a **CORNCRAKE** from close by and luckily Robert Shore was fast enough to rattle off a few photos to confirm the ID. This long distance Western Palearctic migrant which winters in sub-equatorial Africa is well known for its vagrancy and has twice previously been recorded in Australia, with the last record during WW2. Both these records are likely to be ship assisted, making this bird the first true vagrant. A phenomenal experience!



Corncrake (Robert Shore)

With the final mega rarity of the trip in the bag we only had one morning left on Christmas Island. We returned to the area of open grassland where we had previously found the Corncrake and this time we were rewarded with a nice surprise in the form of two **JAPANESE SPARROWHAWK** which circled overhead.



Japanese Sparrowhawk (Richard Baxter)

The November tour was hugely successful with a cracking list of vagrants but to see thirty vagrants during the December tour was far beyond what anyone on the tour could have predicted or even hoped for. In 2010 we recorded 24 vagrants on this tour, which I thought we would never surpass. I was astounded when in 2011 we recorded 26 vagrants over the two weeks of the Nov/Dec tour. That was a mark I was confident we would never beat or at



least would stand for twenty or so years. To see 31 vagrants/rarities in a fortnight in December 2016 was truly staggering.

Thanks must go to a wonderful group of enthusiastic participants, who worked as a team to find birds not only for themselves but the entire group. We will all hold many good memories from both these tours for a long time into the future.



Yellow Bittern (Hedley Earl)



Golf Course coastline (Richard Baxter)



Drongo Cuckoo (Damian Baxter)



Looking for the kingfisher (Keith Fisher)



Photographing swifts (James Mustafa)



Which way did it go ? (Keith Fisher)

February tour -...to be continued.

Upcoming Trips:

6-20<sup>th</sup> January 2018 (School Holidays)

13-27<sup>th</sup> November 2018

1-15<sup>th</sup> December 2018

March and December 2019

## Species list

Red Junglefowl – Seen only on CI.  
Green Junglefowl – Common on Cocos  
**Common Teal** - Seen on Cocos on both tours almost daily.  
Pacific Black Duck – Up to 50 seen on Cocos.  
**Northern Pintail** - Seen on Cocos on both tours almost daily  
Wedge-tailed Shearwater – Observed whilst sea watching on Cocos  
Red-tailed Tropicbird – Common on CI  
White-tailed Tropicbird – Common on both islands.  
**Red-billed Tropicbird** - Seen only on the November tour on the northern side of Christmas Island.  
Abbott's Booby – Common on CI.  
Red-footed Booby – Abundant on CI.  
Brown Booby – Abundant on CI.  
Masked Booby – one seen on Cocos.  
Great Frigatebird - Abundant on CI.  
Lesser Frigatebird – Seen on CI and Cocos in small numbers.  
Christmas Frigatebird - Abundant on CI.  
White-faced Heron – Seen on CI.  
Little Egret – Several seen on CI.  
Eastern Reef Egret – Several on CI & abundant on Cocos  
**Western Reef Heron** - Several birds seen on Cocos.  
Great Egret - Seen on CI.  
Intermediate Egret (*intermedia*) - Two birds seen on CI.  
**Chinese Pond Heron** - Two birds seen on Cocos.  
**Javan Pond Heron** - A single bird seen on Cocos.  
Striated Heron – Several seen on both islands.  
Nankeen Night Heron – One seen on CI and abundant on Cocos.  
**Black-crowned Night Heron** - A single bird seen over several days on Cocos.  
**Malayan Night Heron** - Two birds seen on Christmas Island.  
**Yellow Bittern** - Both islands including three at once on Cocos and another on Christmas Island.  
**Von Schrenck's Bittern** - Two birds on Cocos.  
Brown (CI) Goshawk – Common on CI.  
**Chinese Sparrowhawk** - Three birds seen on Cocos.  
**Japanese Sparrowhawk** - Three birds seen on Christmas Island.  
Peregrine Falcon (*calidis*) seen on CI.  
Nankeen Kestrel – Common on CI.  
White-breasted Waterhen – Abundant on Cocos & several on CI.  
**Corncrake** - A single bird on Christmas Island.  
**Pin-tailed Snipe** - Several seen on Cocos.  
**Swinhoe's Snipe** - Seen only on the November tour on CI.  
Bar-tailed Godwit – Cocos  
Eastern Curlew - Cocos  
**Eurasian Curlew** - Seen on Cocos multiple times.  
Whimbrel – Cocos  
Common Greenshank – Cocos  
Common Sandpiper – Both islands in small numbers.  
Grey-tailed Tattler – Cocos



Ruddy Turnstone – Cocos  
Red-necked Stint – Cocos  
Sharp-tailed Sandpiper – Cocos  
Sanderling – Cocos  
Curlew Sandpiper – Cocos  
Grey Plover – Cocos  
Pacific Golden Plover – Seen on both islands.  
Lesser Sandplover – Cocos  
Greater Sandplover – Cocos  
Oriental Pratincole – Seen on both islands.  
Lesser Crested Tern – Seen on Cocos.  
Crested tern – Seen on CI  
**Saunders's Tern** - Up to 15 birds seen on Cocos.  
White-winged Black Tern – Cocos  
Common Noddy – Common on both islands.  
White Tern – Common on Cocos  
Common Emerald Dove – Common on CI.  
Christmas Island Imperial Pigeon – Abundant on CI.  
Christmas Boobook – Seen on CI  
**Asian Koel** - Multiple birds seen on both islands.  
**Drongo Cuckoo** - Two birds seen on two different islands on Cocos.  
**Grey Nightjar** - Seen twice on Christmas Island.  
**Savanna Nightjar** - One bird seen on Christmas Island.  
CI Glossy Swiftlet – Abundant on Christmas Island.  
White-throated Needletail – Seen on CI  
Pacific Swift – Seen on both islands in small numbers  
Blythe's/Cooks type Swifts – Possibly seen on both islands.  
**Common Swift** - One bird seen on one afternoon on Christmas Island.  
**Common Kingfisher** - A lone bird seen on Cocos.  
Dollarbird – One individual seen on Christmas Island.  
**Asian Brown Flycatcher** - A lone bird seen several times on Cocos.  
**Blue and White Flycatcher** - Two birds seen on Cocos.  
**Brown Shrike** - A lone bird seen often on Cocos.  
**Eye-browed Thrush** - A lone bird seen on Cocos multiple times.  
**Grey Wagtail** - Up to five birds seen on Christmas Island.  
**Tree Pipit** - A lone bird seen on Cocos.  
Eurasian Tree Sparrow – Common on CI  
Java Sparrow – Small numbers on CI  
Barn Swallow – Seen on both islands.  
**Asian House Martin** - Two birds seen regularly on Christmas Island.  
Christmas Island White-eye – Abundant on CI.  
Island Thrush – Abundant on CI.  
**Rosy Starling** - Two birds seen on Cocos.