

POLYNESIA

8 - 30 SEPTEMBER 2004

TOUR REPORT

LEADER: MARK VAN BEIRS

On our second tour to remote Polynesia we visited 12 islands, took 12 flights and enjoyed a splendid 9 days of sailing on sleek catamarans amongst atolls and islands that have been immortalized by people like Captain Bligh, Robert Louis Stevenson, Herman Melville, Marlon Brando and Jacques Brel. We visited four areas which are defined by BirdLife International as Endemic Bird Areas: the Southern Cook islands (EBA 210), the Marquesas (EBA 212), the Society Islands (EBA 213) and the Tuamotu archipelago (EBA 214) and saw no less than 22 species that are listed in "Threatened Birds of the World" as Critical, Endangered, Vulnerable or Near-Threatened, an amazing 33 % of the species recorded on the tour (67). The Bird of the Trip was without any doubt the amazingly confiding and delightful Tuamotu Sandpiper, which gave us such a marvellous time on its remote motu. Other memorable birds included Tahiti and Phoenix Petrels, Bristle-thighed Curlew, Blue-grey Noddy, Polynesian Ground-Dove, Polynesian and Nuku Hiva Pigeons, Blue and Ultramarine Lorikeets, Mangaia and Tuamotu Kingfishers, Rarotonga, Tahiti and Iphis Monarchs and Rarotonga Starling.

A very long flight took us via Los Angeles and Tahiti to the small island of Rarotonga in the middle of the southern Pacific Ocean. The very smooth and informal immigration at Rarotonga, the capital of the Cook Islands was a nice surprise and here we met the Australian contingent, got our minibus and checked into the nearby hotel. A refreshing shower, a hearty breakfast and a beach with Wandering Tattler, Pacific Reef Heron and Common Fairy Tern got the tour really going. Meanwhile I obtained my Cook Islands driving license at the local police station. A few hours later we were already boarding a small plane, destination Aitutaki, the most famous holiday island of the Cook archipelago. After a short flight we landed at a rainy and very windy airfield, courtesy of the American WW II air force. The nearby golf course held several Pacific Golden Plovers, of which some still showed bits of the attractive breeding plumage. But best of all was the Masked Lapwing, that was still making Aitutaki its home. This rare vagrant from Australasia was first seen here by the Birdquest party two years ago. We then took the local bus that dropped holiday makers at their hotels and that brought us to the middle of the island to a patch of woodland with coco palms, fig trees, mango trees and bananas. Not long after we found several fine Blue Lorikeets hiding in the canopy of the bigger trees. They were rather skittish, probably because of the relentless wind. But we obtained magical scope views of several feeding on banana and coconut flowers. In the end we observed c20 of these

marvellous little birds, which only survive on a few islands in the Cooks and Tuamotus. They were probably introduced to Aitutaki a long time ago, as they were used by the local peoples as a valuable exchange item. Some seawatching over the unusually rough ocean gave us Red-footed and Brown Boobies, a distant Tahiti Petrel and a couple of Great Frigatebirds. In late afternoon we flew back to Rarotonga, where we ended the very long day with a tasty Mongolian barbeque.

After a stormy and rather noisy night we flew to the southernmost island in the Cook archipelago: Mangaia. Upon arrival we were welcomed by Jan, our amiable Swedish host and whilst waiting for the luggage we were watching scores of Brown Noddies over the agitated waves. After coffee we explored the nearby pandanus (screw palm) and Barringtonia forest where we soon found our first Cook Island Reed Warblers. These large and bright yellow *Acrocephalus* warblers are restricted to Mangaia and nearby Mitiaro and cooperated very well. We also observed several of the endemic Mangaia Kingfishers, perching high in the trees and calling infrequently. We managed to get cracking scope views of this little known species. In the afternoon we were shown around several of the very impressive caves where our guide told grim stories of cannibalism and local wars. On a pond in a taro plantation we located several Pacific Black Duck and in the evening we enjoyed a delicious dinner whilst being treated to some fine and enthusiastic dancing by the local beauties. It rained again most of the night and when we woke up it was still quite stormy. Another walk in the nearby forest yielded more good and final views of Mangaia Kingfisher and Cook Islands Reed Warbler.

Upon our return to Rarotonga we started to walk the cross island track, but intermittent rain made us decide to stay in the more open areas near the trailhead. Here we soon located several large Pacific Imperial Pigeons and some lovely Cook Islands Fruit-Doves, whilst good numbers of Insular Flying Foxes were flapping about. A couple of migrant Long-tailed Cuckoos showed as did several endemic Rarotonga Starlings, but we only saw them in flight. Lots of attractive Red Junglefowl foraged along the woodland edge. Another night with heavy rain, lightning and thunder followed and in the morning we toured the island whilst the weather gods did their utmost to give us an excellent sound and light show. It was Sunday morning and most of the population of Rarotonga was attending one of the many, many churches, as these islands are really god fearing. One of the first questions I was asked by a Cook Islander on one of the internal flights was which church I belonged to just to give an idea of what goes on in the Cook islands !!!! There very few birds about and as we checked some potential wader sites, we only found Wandering Tattlers and Pacific Golden Plovers. In the afternoon we were guided around the Takitumu Conservation Area by local Kakerori (Rarotonga Monarch) protector Ed and finally, after a fair bit of frustrating searching a lovely adult showed brilliantly during a short lull in the rainy weather. We were told the success story of the comeback of the Kakerori, whose population was down to only 29 birds twenty years ago. Now 273 birds inhabit the forested valleys of southern Rarotonga and they have also been introduced to the island of Atiu. The next morning we returned to this area, but again heavy rain sabotaged our visit and we didn't really see anything.

In the late morning we flew to the island of Atiu, our fourth island of the Cook Islands. We settled into our lovely cabins and explored the surrounding area, where Atiu Swiftlet and some very cooperative Cook Islands Fruit-Doves performed. Later we visited the swiftlet caves where we were treated to fantastic views of these endemics on their fragile nests. We also heard them echo-locate in the darkness of their breeding cave. A splendid experience. We were told they had starting breeding two months earlier than normal and the locals were expecting some really unusual weather in the months to come. A smashing Chattering Kingfisher stole the show here and we finally saw the sun after five days in the South Seas!!! In the evening we were treated to another floor show with some lovely dancing. Several group members joined a tumunu, a local self-made alcoholic brew drinking session and loved every bit of it. Next morning we visited several birding areas with the local birdman and got superb views of Chattering Kingfishers and briefer looks at a couple of Long-tailed Cuckoos. We also heard a Spotless Crake call from dense marshy vegetation. We then returned to Rarotonga and revisited the Takitumu Conservation Area in dry sunny weather. Lots of Rarotonga

Monarchs showed extremely well and we even saw them display together above the canopy. Both grey adults and bright orange youngsters were noted. A Herald Petrel flew amongst the higher tops and several Rarotonga Starlings allowed good views. After another excellent buffet dinner we bade farewell to the hospitable Cook Islands and took the late evening flight to Tahiti, where we arrived in the middle of the night.

A late breakfast with a splendid view over the jagged mountains of distant Moorea was followed by a quick look at the introduced Zebra Doves, Red-vented Bulbuls, Chestnut-breasted Mannikins, Common Waxbills and Silvereyes in the gardens. Later we explored one of the few tracks that cuts inland following a deep V-shaped valley offering magnificent vistas over the interior of Tahiti. White-tailed Tropicbirds were flying about and in clumps of tall bamboo we located the lethargic and long-billed Tahiti Reed Warbler. After a bit of searching we managed scope views of several Tahiti Kingfishers. A smashing male, a more subdued female and a quiet youngster showed well and later another three were noted. Several Grey-green Fruit-Doves appeared in front of our binoculars and during our late afternoon return we got acquainted with the Papeete traffic jams. The splendid sunset finally gave us the real Polynesian feel, which was then enhanced by the very professional Polynesian dance show.

Next morning we took a flight in a prop job to distant Nuku Hiva in the Marquesas. From the plane we had amazing views over some of the islands and atolls of the Tuamotus we were to visit later in the tour. We found Nuku Hiva dripping with rain and drove along the north coast track that gave us breath-taking panoramas of high cliffs and palm-dotted valleys, whilst the huge lump of 1224m high Tekao mountain was looming through the clouds. A short stop yielded great looks at Little Fairy Tern - easily distinguished from Common Fairy Tern by its fine bill and small size - and scores of White-capped Fruit-Doves, several Marquesas Reed Warblers and Marquesas Swiftlets. At the base of a lovely bay we drove through a small picturesque village and nearby, in an area with lots of big fig trees we had eye-ball to eye-ball views of weird-looking and extremely rare Nuku Hiva Pigeons. The flat feathered cere of these bizarre pigeons has to be seen. Taiohae is the capital of the Marquesas and in our cosy hotel at the edge of the village we were welcomed by Marie-Jo, great food and more views of the endemics in the gardens. Next morning a small fishing boat took us to the distant island of Ua Huka, but shortly after leaving the harbour, the skipper got extremely worried as his engine was heating up and we quickly returned. Several delicate-looking Blue-grey Noddies offered some consolation. It took a while to find another boat, but eventually a diving boat ferried us across to Ua Huka. It was quite choppy and we saw lots of seabirds, but it was difficult to observe them well. Bulwer's Petrels and a large colony of Sooty Terns, together with lots of Black Noddies and Little Fairy Terns were well appreciated. Upon arrival at Ua Huka we were warmly welcomed by our hosts and soon after we were exploring an open forested valley where extremely handsome, endemic Ultramarine Lorikeets showed at length. The excellent lobster dinner was enlivened by the magnificent dancing of three very beautiful nieces of the landlady. Several members of the group were seriously considering staying on the island and the names of Moi, Haputini and Tahiahee (Liliane) were often mentioned in the days after. Our morning visit to the Botanical Gardens on the driest island of the Marquesas was marred by lots of rain, but as soon as it stopped several Iphis Monarchs made an appearance. Great scope studies of this endemic followed and a pair of preening Ultramarine Lorikeets were out of this world. A couple of Polynesian Rats represented the mammal department. In the afternoon we returned by boat to Nuku Hiva and as we were going with the wind and the current we had a much smoother and more enjoyable crossing, with many great views of Bulwer's and Tahiti Petrels, Audubon's Shearwater and Masked Booby. A school of Long-snouted Spinner Dolphins offered some spectacular jumping and pirouetting acrobatics. The next day was mainly a travelling day as we returned to Tahiti to enjoy our last night in a non moving bed.

On our final morning on Tahiti we were taken to a secluded valley by a very friendly and enthusiastic researcher who took us to the territories of several Tahiti Monarchs. Only 40 individuals are left and the rat poisoning devices and the metal rings around the trees left no doubt about the animals

responsible for this demise. Both black adults and a brown immature bird came to inspect us and allowed us to add this rarest of Polynesian birds to our tally. We also observed a breeding colony of Tahiti Swiftlets under an overhanging part of a cliff and had great looks at the swiftlets on their fragile nests in the dense colony.

In the afternoon we took yet another flight, this time to the atoll of Fakarava in the Tuamotus, where our cruise through this archipelago was about to start. Two beautiful catamarans were waiting for us and we got to know the French skippers Philippe and Christophe and the cooks Jerome and Manu. We examined our elegant boats and settled in, whilst several Spectacled Terns hovered nearby. After our first of many excellent dinners, we started sailing to our next destination. The overnight navigation was unexpectedly smooth and soon after dawn, whilst waiting for the other boat some of us took a walk on the nearby shore where we found our first Bristle-thighed Curlew, Atoll Fruit-Dove and Tuamotu Reed Warbler. We then sailed together into the atoll to a distant forested motu (local name for an islet). An impressive Sailfish threw itself several times out of the water and left us open mouthed. As soon as we set foot on the motu several Bristle-thighed Curlews were noted and then a small, almost quail-like Tuamotu Sandpiper walked up to us, as if to inspect us and ask for our papers. What a delightful little creature!! During our walk around the islet we recorded several more of these truly enigmatic waders and no less than 14 Bristle-thighed Curlews. There were also lots of endearing Common White Terns nesting, together with Red-footed and Masked Boobies. Sheer heaven and my idea of what a tropical paradise should look like. After lunch and a siesta we went swimming and snorkeling with Black-tipped Reef Sharks and then paid another visit to our favourite Polynesian islet. The Tuamotu Sandpipers were very aerial with several pairs displaying above the canopy and flying to nearby motus. We also saw them walk along the leaves of coco palms and managed to obtain scope views of both Bristle-thighed Curlew and Tuamotu Sandpiper together. It was very obvious which bird was going to win the Bird of the Trip contest. For dinner the two catamarans were moored next to each other and as the day died in a fury of crimsons and royal purples we were sipping our aperitif with calling Bristle-thighed Curlews in the background.... some Birdquest tours are really tough. Early next morning we paid our last visit to the Sandpipers. We sat and communed with them and treasured our final time with this splendour of a bird. Later we sailed to another motu which harboured a large seabird colony. with many Black Noddies, Common Fairy Terns and Lesser Frigatebirds. Males with half inflated pouches, downy young and immatures in different plumages were studied.

In late afternoon we started cruising towards Fakarava atoll and as there was enough wind, we could sail without the engine, which made for a very peaceful trip. A party of Bottle-nose Dolphins welcomed us here and during our relaxed stay we enjoyed the Spectacled Terns and a Long-tailed Cuckoo. The island of Niau was our next destination and soon after dawn we were looking at this strange island, which has a large landlocked brackish lagoon. A lot of work was going on with the building of a new airport on this palm-covered isle. Our man on the spot took us swiftly to a territory of the Tuamotu Kingfisher and shortly after we were watching the rarest kingfisher in the world. A recent survey has revealed there are only 51 birds left and the population is still declining, mainly because of Black Rats. Poor little kingfisher!!! After a thorough study of this jewel we boarded our lovely catamarans and sailed to the atoll of Rangiroa, one of the largest atolls in the world. At sea we encountered several concentrations of Red-footed Boobies, Common White Terns and both species of Noddy, whilst 15 Tahiti Petrels and a couple of Phoenix Petrels stole the show. One of the catamarans caught a beautiful Dolphin Fish. The ocean was smooth at first, but became quite choppy during the night, resulting in the least pleasant overnight on board.

We arrived at the Tiputa passe of the Rangiroa atoll at first light and had great fun sailing against the very strong outgoing current. Civilization was waiting here for us in the form of a hotel and a café with tasty Hinano beer. Lots of international yachts were moored nearby and later we snorkelled in the passe where we fed the dainty butterfly fishes which were so carefully taking bits from the hand. Several Black-tipped Reef Sharks and some adorable Blue-grey Noddies were also much

appreciated. A speedboat took us to a distant tiny, forested motu, one of the very few places where the cute Polynesian Ground-Dove manages to survive. Shortly after landing we saw our first Dove in flight, and this was then followed by smashing views of three striking males huddling together in the undergrowth. We just sat with these magical creatures and studied them at minimal distance. So incredibly unconcerned and thus so easy targets for the dreaded rats. Several Bristle-thighed Curlews also favoured this little paradise.

At the end of the day our two cats pointed their bows towards the once well-known island of Makatea. A Wedge-tailed Shearwater was the last bird of the day and soon after breakfast we were watching the forbidden cliffs that surround this high limestone plateau. Makatea is very different from the other islands in the Tuamotus and landing here can be precarious. But Neptune was with us and the little swell posed no problem as skipper Philippe put us ashore in the old decaying harbour. Within 15 minutes we had already bagged our two target endemics: Polynesian Imperial Pigeon and Makatea Fruit-Dove. The former used to occur on Tahiti, but is probably extinct there. We found a fruiting tree with up to 15 Polynesian Imperial Pigeons feeding and showing off. Several strange-looking dark young birds were also present. The Makatea Fruit-Doves also showed very well and then we strolled around the island enjoying the ghost town atmosphere of this once prosperous place, where several thousand people used to live and work till the early sixties. Warehouses, several gantries, the disused railway with the remains of locomotives and a plateau full of shafts where the phosphate was dug from reminded us of the busy mining days. We returned to our faithful cats for a leisurely sail south towards Tahiti. We were entertained by lots of Audubon's Shearwaters and several fishing rafts with the regular Red-footed Boobies, both Noddies and Common White Terns, where small fish were chased to the surface by hunting Tuna or Bonito. Next dawn we could discern the jagged mountains of Tahiti in the distance and found our catamaran surrounded by Tahiti Petrels and Audubon's Shearwaters. Some showed at very close range and a few were even sitting on the incredibly smooth surface of the ocean. One of our boats also had a splendid encounter with a couple of Humpback Whales. We sailed to the dock of our hotel where we said goodbye to our generous skippers and crew and enjoyed the luxuries of our accommodation before our middle of the night flight to the other side of the globe.

It sure had been an incredible and unforgettable trip and those endearing Tuamotu Sandpipers will remain one of my favourites forever.

SYSTEMATIC LIST

Species which were heard but not seen are indicated by the symbol (H).

Species which were not personally recorded by the leader are indicated by the symbol (NL).

Subspecies names are given where known and/or appropriate, either in a comment or in parentheses.

PROCELLARIIDAE

Wedge-tailed Shearwater *Puffinus pacificus*: A few distantly off Rarotonga and a single from our catamaran off Rangiroa atoll in the Tuamotus.

Audubon's Shearwater *Puffinus lherminieri*: Three off Nuku Hiva and at least 40 offering prolonged splendid views between Makatea and Tahiti (*dichrous*).

Bulwer's Petrel *Bulweria bulwerii*: At least 45 were counted during the pelagic between Nuku Hiva and Ua Huka (Marquesas). Magnificent studies. The bird is named after the Reverend James Bulwer (1794-1879), Scottish naturalist and collector and chaplain at Madeira in 1828.

Tahiti Petrel *Pseudobulweria rostrata*: Regular observations of this lovely seabird. We observed it in the Cook Islands, the Marquesas, the Tuamotus and the Society Islands. We obtained terrific close up views between Niau and Rangiroa (Tuamotus) and whilst sailing towards Tahiti on our last day at sea (nominate). Note that this species is not a *Pterodroma* anymore, as it has now been put in the genus *Pseudobulweria*. It is considered as Near-Threatened in "Threatened Birds of the World".

Phoenix Petrel *Pterodroma alba*: Two showed quite well between Niau and Rangiroa atoll (Tuamotus) and a single was seen between Makatea and Tahiti. It is considered as Vulnerable in "Threatened Birds of the World".

Herald Petrel *Pterodroma heraldica*: A couple of the nominate race were flying high over the misty tops of Rarotonga (Cook Islands).

(The dark petrel that some of us saw at sea between Niau and Rangiroa may have been a Murphy's Petrel, but the possibility of a rare all dark morph Herald Petrel can not be discounted)

PHAETHONTIDAE

White-tailed Tropicbird *Phaethon lepturus*: One of the most widespread seabirds of the tour. We observed this elegant critter in the Cook islands, in the Marquesas, in the Tuamotus (but just a few) and in the Society Islands (*dorothea*).

SULIDAE

Masked Booby *Sula dactylatra*: A single between Ua Huka and Nuku Hiva (Marquesas) and six of these large gannet-like boobies at Tahanea atoll in the Tuamotus (*personata*).

Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster*: Widespread in small numbers throughout the trip (*plotus*).

Red-footed Booby *Sula sula*: Even more numerous than the preceding species, with a maximum of c100 between Niau and Rangiroa (Tuamotus). Most of the birds seen were of the white-tailed brown morph, but we also recorded several very attractive white morphs.

FREGATIDAE

Great Frigatebird *Fregata minor*: Regular observations of this very distinctive seabird (*palmerstoni*). Frigatebirds have the lowest wing-loading (low weight in contrast to large wing area) of all birds, enabling them to be amongst the most nimble of flyers.

Lesser Frigatebird *Fregata ariel*: This kleptoparasite was seen in small numbers at most of the visited islands (nominate). Lovely views of breeding birds and youngsters in Tahanea atoll.

ARDEIDAE

Pacific Reef Heron (P R Egret) *Egretta sacra*: A widespread species, occurring in small numbers on all four archipelagos visited (nominate). Both white and dark morphs were observed, often together.

ANATIDAE

Grey Duck (Pacific Black Duck) *Anas superciliosa*: 30 on Mangaia, 15 at Lake Teroto on Atiu and a few on Tahiti (*pelewensis*).

ACCIPITRIDAE

Swamp Harrier *Circus approximans*: This introduced species was observed in small numbers on Tahiti.

PHASIANIDAE

Red Junglefowl *Gallus gallus*: It was not easy to assess the occurrence of this species as feral chickens that resembled barnyard animals rather than original wild stock were widespread. All the populations in Polynesia were introduced by human colonists. Apparently wild-type populations were observed on Rarotonga and Tahiti.

RALLIDAE

Spotless Crake *Porzana tabuensis* (H): A frustrating species, which was heard at Lake Teroto on Atiu (nominate).

CHARADRIIDAE

Pacific Golden Plover *Pluvialis fulva*: Widespread and fairly common in the Cook Islands, but rather scarce in French Polynesia. Many birds still showed bits of their attractive breeding plumage.

Masked Lapwing *Vanellus miles*: A nice surprise to find this bird again at Aitutaki Airfield, where it was found two years ago on our first Birdquest tour. This Australasian species has its nearest breeding range in New Zealand (*novaeollandiae*).

SCOLOPACIDAE

Wandering Tattler *Heteroscelus incanus*: Fairly widespread in small numbers, found on Rarotonga, Atiu, Tahiti, Nuku Hiva, Ua Huka, Fakarava atoll, Tahanea atoll, Niau, Rangiroa atoll and Makatea.

Tuamotu Sandpiper *Prosobonia cancellata*: Definitely the star bird of the trip. No less than 15 of these adorable birds were found on one small motu in the Tuamotus. They were so tame and unconcerned by our presence, allowing such close approach, that one can easily appreciate why they and their offspring soon fall prey to rats once these colonize an islet. Sitting with these cute waders foraging only a few feet from us was one of the highlights of the tour. It is considered as Endangered in "Threatened Birds of the World", BirdLife International's splendid book on the sad state of affair of 10% of the world's avifauna. The total population of this enigmatic wader consists of less than a 1000 birds!!! The favourite bird for Pete, Chris, Adri and Ian.

Bristle-thighed Curlew *Numenius tahitiensis*: Great looks at no less than 13 at our first atoll and another three on a small islet in Rangiroa atoll. Perfect scope views that allowed us to discern the bristles on the thighs. The birds were very confiding, in contrast to their timidity on the breeding grounds in far away Alaska. It is considered as Vulnerable in "Threatened Birds of the World", BirdLife International's splendid book on the sad state of affair of 10% of the world's avifauna. Alan's favourite.

LARIDAE

- Great Crested Tern (Greater C T) *Sterna bergii*: Common and widespread in the Tuamotus (*cristata*).
- Spectacled Tern (Grey-backed T) *Sterna lunata*: Fairly common locally in the Tuamotus. This species is confined to islands in the tropical Pacific.
- Sooty Tern *Sterna fuscata*: We observed a magnificent colony with more than 10000 birds on an islet of Ua Huka (Marquesas). A few showed in the Tuamotus (*oahuensis*).
- Brown Noddy *Anous stolidus*: A common or even abundant and widespread species, especially in the Tuamotus (*pileatus*).
- Black Noddy *Anous minutus*: Fairly common on Nuku Hiva and Ua Huka, and no less than 300 during the crossing between the two islands. Very common and widespread in the Tuamotus, where we recorded up to 300 or more in a day. A good field mark to distinguish this from the latter is the contrasting grey tail of Black Noddy. Although this character is useful throughout the Pacific it is not relevant in the South Atlantic.
- Blue-grey Noddy *Procelsterna cerulea*: No less than 100 of these delicate smoky-grey terns during the crossing from Ua Huka to Nuku Hiva (nominate). We also saw six of the race *teritirostris* at Rangiroa atoll. A truly adorable species. Both Clements and the Handbook of the Birds of the World (HBW) call this form Blue Noddy *Procelsterna cerulea*, whilst the forms on Lord Howe Island, Norfolk Island, Kermadec, Tonga, Henderson, Easter Island and Desaventurados Island are considered a separate species: Grey Noddy *P. albivitta*.
- Common Fairy Tern (C White T) *Gygis alba*: This lovely seabird was common and widespread in the Cook Islands, Tahiti and the Tuamotus, where we recorded up to 100 in a day, but it is replaced in the Marquesas by the next species (*candida*).
- Little Fairy Tern (L White T) *Gygis microrhyncha*: Very common in the Marquesas, with up to 200 in a day at Nuku Hiva and Ua Huka. The split was quite convincing after one had studied the birds in detail. Note that both Clements and HBW do not consider it as a separate species.

COLUMBIDAE

- Rock Dove *Columba livia*: Mercifully absent from the Cook Islands and the Tuamotus, but fairly common on Tahiti and on Nuku Hiva and Ua Huka.
- Zebra Dove *Geopelia striata*: This introduced species was common in populated areas on Tahiti. We also observed small numbers on Nuku Hiva.
- Polynesian Ground-Dove *Gallicolumba erythroptera*: Three males of these wonderfully tame and strikingly beautiful little doves were admired on one of the motus in Rangiroa atoll. Seeing these delightful birds preen and going about their daily tasks at minimal range was a heart warming experience. This bird is considered as Critical in "Threatened Birds of the World", BirdLife International's splendid book on the sad state of affair of 10% of the world's avifauna. The total population is tiny and this species only survives on a few small wooded islets. The number two in the Bird of the Trip contest. Dave's favourite.
- Cook Islands Fruit-Dove *Ptilinopus rarotongensis*: Small numbers on Rarotonga (nominate) and fairly common on Atiu (*goodwini*). It is considered as Vulnerable in "Threatened Birds of the World".
- Grey-green Fruit-Dove *Ptilinopus purpuratus*: Small numbers on Tahiti, where it was both uncommon and hard to get a decent look at (nominate).
- Atoll Fruit-Dove *Ptilinopus coralensis*: At least three at our first atoll and eight at Niau. It is considered as Near-Threatened in "Threatened Birds of the World".
- Makatea Fruit-Dove *Ptilinopus chalcurus*: Quite common on Makatea where a total of 12 were seen. It is considered as Vulnerable in "Threatened Birds of the World".

White-capped Fruit-Dove *Ptilinopus dupetithouarsii*: The race *viridior* was common on Nuku Hiva and Ua Huka (Marquesas). The bird is named after Admiral Abel Aubert Dupetit-Thouars (1793-1864), French explorer in the Pacific.

Pacific Pigeon (P Imperial Pigeon) *Ducula pacifica*: Fair numbers of the nominate race on Rarotonga and Atiu (Cook islands). This species occurs on small islands in the western Pacific.

Polynesian Pigeon (P Imperial Pigeon) *Ducula aurorae*: Magnificent views of at least 30 birds on Makatea (nominate). As it is now virtually extinct on Tahiti it should now be considered as a Makatea endemic. It is treated as Endangered in "Threatened Birds of the World" and the population numbers a few hundred birds.

Nukuhiva Pigeon (N Imperial Pigeon, Marquesas Imperial Pigeon) *Ducula galatea*: Magnificent views of four of these weird and huge pigeons on Nuku Hiva. It is considered as Critical in "Threatened Birds of the World". They have recently been introduced to Ua Huka, where they seem to do well and the total population stands now at c190 birds.

PSITTACIDAE

Blue Lorikeet *Vini peruviana*: We found about 20 of these sweet little parrots on Aitutaki, mostly favouring the big mango trees, but also feeding in palms and bananas. It is considered as Vulnerable in "Threatened Birds of the World". A confusing scientific epithet!!

Ultramarine Lorikeet *Vini ultramarina*: Gorgeous studies of these exquisite creatures in the gardens and woods of Ua Huka. The preening pair in the Botanical Gardens really showed off. It is considered as Endangered in "Threatened Birds of the World". This wonderful bird is now restricted to two islands in the Marquesas. Vini is the local name for this species. A new bird for the Birdquest lifelist.

CUCULIDAE

Long-tailed Cuckoo (Long-tailed Koel) *Eudynamys taitensis*: Small numbers of this Austral winter visitor from New Zealand on both Rarotonga and Atiu, and also seen on Fakarava atoll and heard on Makatea. They are apparently uncommon visitors in French Polynesia.

APODIDAE

Tahiti Swiftlet (Polynesian Swiftlet) *Aerodramus leucophaeus*: c 50 at a lovely colony on the west side of Tahiti. Great looks at birds on their nests on a cliff. It is considered as Vulnerable in "Threatened Birds of the World".

Atiu Swiftlet *Aerodramus sawtelli*: Fairly common on Atiu. It was a real pleasure to visit a breeding cave and listen to the echo-locating clicks as the birds flew around in total darkness, never mind observing the birds on their tiny nests at close range. The local name is Kopeka. It is considered as Vulnerable in "Threatened Birds of the World".

Marquesas Swiftlet *Aerodramus ocistus*: Common on Nuku Hiva and Ua Huka (nominate).

ALCEDINIDAE

Chattering Kingfisher *Halcyon tuta*: Up to seven individuals both days on Atiu, where we witnessed some nice display (*atiu*). We also heard it on Tahiti (nominate). This species is restricted to two islands in the Cooks and six islands in the Society archipelago. The four species of kingfisher seen on the tour are sometimes put in the genus *Todiramphus*.

Mangaia Kingfisher *Halcyon ruficollaris*: Up to four each day on Mangaia. It is treated as Vulnerable in "Threatened Birds of the World" and the population is estimated at 400-700 birds. HBW considers this form as a subspecies of Chattering Kingfisher *H. tuta*.

Tuamotu Kingfisher *Halcyon gambieri*: Still declining on Niau, where we observed a single bird at length. It is now considered extinct on Mangareva Island and has thus become a Niau endemic. A recent census found only 51 birds and this species must be considered to be

the rarest of all 93 species of Kingfishers!! It is considered as only Vulnerable in "Threatened Birds of the World", but this will surely be reevaluated soon.

Tahiti Kingfisher *Halcyon venerata*: Great scope views of several on Tahiti (nominate). It is restricted to Tahiti and nearby Moorea.

HIRUNDINIDAE

Pacific Swallow *Hirundo tahitica*: Surprisingly uncommon on Tahiti where only seen in small numbers. Represented here by a very dark subspecies with a really peculiar flight (nominate).

PYCNONOTIDAE

Red-vented Bulbul *Pycnonotus cafer*: A common introduction on Tahiti.

MONARCHIDAE

Rarotonga Monarch *Pomarea dimidiata*: No less than eight of this slowly recovering endemic at the Takitumu Conservation Area on Rarotonga. We were also taken to see a relocated pair on Atiu, where a second population is becoming established. The Kakerori is considered as Endangered in "Threatened Birds of the World" and the population is currently c273 birds. Strange to see them display high above the canopy.

Tahiti Monarch *Pomarea nigra*: Thanks to the generosity of a local and very enthusiastic researcher we watched a pair of adults and an immature in one of the few remaining valleys that holds this species on the west side of Tahiti. The population stands at only 40 birds and the species is treated as Critical in "Threatened Birds of the World".

Iphis Monarch *Pomarea iphis*: Great looks at ten individuals of this Ua Huka endemic (nominate). It used to occur on the island of Eioa, but has gone extinct there. It is considered as Vulnerable in "Threatened Birds of the World" and the population is estimated at 500-1250 birds. A new species for the Birdquest lifelist. Iphis means rapid or fleet in Greek.

SYLVIIDAE

Tahiti Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus caffra*: An uncommon bird, with just a few recorded from the Papenoo valley in the north of Tahiti (nominate). It is considered as Vulnerable in "Threatened Birds of the World".

Marquesas Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus mendanae*: Very common on Nuku Hiva (*percernis*) and Ua Huka (*idae*).

Tuamotu Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus atyphus*: Fairly widespread in the Tuamotus, with small numbers at the Fakarava atoll (*ravus*), Niau (*niauensis*), Rangiroa atoll (nominate) and no less than 15 at Makatea (*eremus*).

Cook Islands Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus kerearako*: Fairly common on Mangaia. The only other island it occurs on is Mitiaro. The scientific epithet is its local name. It is considered as Near-Threatened in "Threatened Birds of the World".

STURNIDAE

Rarotonga Starling *Aplonis cinerascens*: Five in a valley in the north of the island and five at the Takitumu Conservation Area on Rarotonga. Not easy to observe this Rarotonga endemic perched. It is considered as Vulnerable in "Threatened Birds of the World".

Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis*: Abundant and widespread in the Cook Islands and Tahiti. This species was introduced into Polynesia to combat insect pests, with dire results for the local fauna in general.

ZOSTEROPIDAE

Silvereye *Zosterops lateralis*: Common on Tahiti and a few on Makatea. Introduced to the Society Islands, possibly from New Caledonia, it has now naturally colonized Makatea in the Tuamotus.

THRAUPIDAE

Crimson-backed Tanager *Ramphocelus dimidiatus*: A few of these introduced birds at our hotel in Tahiti.

ESTRILDIDAE

Common Waxbill *Estrilda astrild*: A very common introduction on Tahiti.

Red-browed Firetail *Emblema temporalis*: Good numbers on Tahiti and on Ua Huka in the Marquesas. An introduced species.

Chestnut-breasted Mannikin *Lonchura castaneothorax*: A common introduction on Tahiti, Nuku Hiva and Ua Huka.

MAMMALS

Insular Flying Fox *Pteropus tonganus*: 25 were seen flapping around in a northern valley on Rarotonga and another 15 at the Takitumu Conservation Area. It was introduced from Tonga.

Spinner Dolphin (Long-snouted S D) *Stenella longirostris*: c40 during the crossing from Ua Huka to Nuku Hiva. Real spectacle.

Bottle-nosed Dolphin *Tursiops truncatus*: Ten were seen near Fakarava atoll.

(The small whales that the Inapo catamaran saw off Tahiti were or Short-finned Pilot Whales *Globicephala macrorhynchus* or Melon-headed Whales *Peponocephala electra*)

Humpback Whale *Megaptera novaeangliae* (NL): Two were seen on two different occasions off Tahiti.

Polynesian Rat *Rattus exulans*: A few observations of this small rodent.

Roof Rat (Black R) *Rattus rattus*: A couple of sightings of this animal, which is considered the biggest threat to the birds of Polynesia.