

Birding Tours Australia

Christmas Cocos Trip Report 2018-19

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www.birdingtours.com.au

Nov 2018 (Tour 39) Dec 2018 (Tour 40) Jan 2019 (Tour 41)



Above: Hodgson's Hawk Cuckoo (Rob Shore)

NOVEMBER 2018 was our 39th tour to the islands. We arrived on Christmas Island for the start of another season of birding Australia's Indian Ocean Territories late in the afternoon and after dropping our luggage at our accommodation we drove to the local supermarket for groceries. Even though the previous few months had been bone dry the weather on arrival was overcast and gloomy. We attempted some late afternoon birding but the light beat us and we retreated to our rooms to prepare for our evening BBQ at Flying Fish Cove.

November is traditionally the best trip for first timers to the islands and photographers. The weather is usually fine and the ocean calm. The Red Crabs are on the move, which makes for great photos and videos and all the breeding seabirds are on the island. The endemics and local specialties are easy to see and some of the regular migrants such as wagtails and Saunders's Tern will have arrived and of course we are on the lookout for any rarities which may be about.

Our first morning was spent not too far from our accommodation in search of Java Sparrows and Asian Koel. After an hour of searching we located a flock of twenty-three **JAVA SPARROW** in a local yard and also had our first good views of **Island Thrush**, **Red-footed Booby** and **Christmas Island Imperial Pigeon**. From there we drove out to the cemetery in search of the koel which is often found feeding on wild Papaya. Scanning the nearby trees we found a nice female **Christmas Frigatebird** and below on the same branch was a **Christmas Island White-eye**, with a **Christmas Island Swiftlet** also flying around tree. Three new birds for most of the group in one binocular view!



Above: **Christmas Island White-eye**

Clouds had built up during the day and as the much needed rain approached we drove to the other side of the island to watch several magnificent **Abbott's Booby** returning to their rainforest canopy trees. A few birds circled overhead, others crash landed through the foliage, as they do and others sat and peered down at the group of admiring birders standing on the roadside below. We scanned the skies for swifts and martins but the wind was blowing from the wrong direction and we had to settle with **Great Frigatebirds**, **Nankeen Kestrels** and **Red-footed Booby** overhead. Before long the rain began and we called it a day. The island was very dry and the rain was much needed. It would top up the rainforest pools, farm dams and hopefully bring in a couple of vagrants.



Above: **Abbott's Booby** and **Red-footed Booby**

The following morning's highlight was a flock of seven **BARN SWALLOW** at Flying Fish Cove. We spread out further afield and soon after Tania discovered a non-breeding **EASTERN YELLOW WAGTAIL** near South Point Temple. We followed up the sighting and after a five minute wait on the veranda the wagtail flew in to a small

puddle adjacent the temple. Later that afternoon we parked and walked onto some private property that I have permission to visit. We slowly crept up on a pond and standing on an island of Water Hyacinth was a co-operative **YELLOW BITTERN** which stood still for a few minutes allowing some photos before it casually walked up the bank and slipped into the forest undergrowth.



Above: Yellow Wagtail and Yellow Bittern

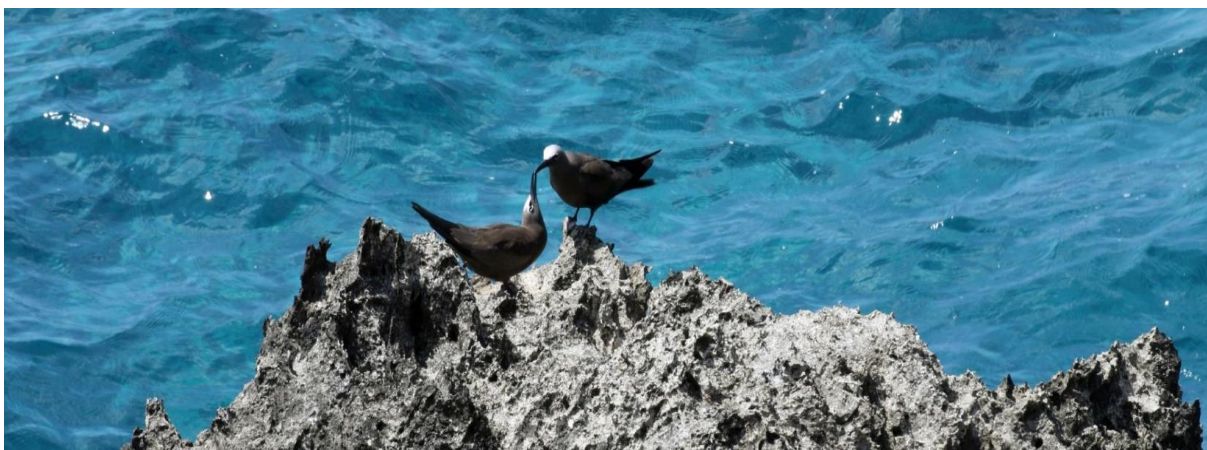
The following morning we walked some rainforest tracks that were closed for the Red Crab migration and had nice views of **Common (Grey-capped) Emerald Dove** before returning for lunch. Over the next three days we visited some of the island's grasslands, old mining sites, rainforest trails and local parks and gardens. Our afternoon visit to the Margaret Knoll lookout was fruitful, with over one hundred Abbott's Booby soaring in an updraft in front of the lookout, providing a rarely seen sight. At an unused mine site, near a large pool of water, we found six **Yellow Wagtails** and along the coast we located **Pacific Reef Egrets, Sanderling** and **Pacific Golden Plover**. The most frustrating event was when a small passerine with a cocked tail darted across the road in front of one of the cars near Grants Well. From the

descriptions it was probably a rubythroat and we all quickly visited the area and tried to relocate it with playback but there was no response. The terrain was impenetrable limestone pinnacles covered in vines, making it impossible to leave the road to search further. We returned to the site several times during the week but the bird was not seen again.

That night we set off after dinner in search of our last endemic, Christmas Boobook. We tried a site where I'd seen the bird previously but it was nowhere to be seen. In the distance we could hear two owls calling, so we drove in the direction of the calls and tried a spot I've never previously searched. Within a couple of minutes of stopping we had a stunning little **Christmas Boobook** providing nice views and staying around long enough for the photographers to get some good photos.



Over the next few days we continued to explore the island finding **Lesser Frigatebird** which was an unusual find with only a few breeding pairs on the island. **Common Noddy** was abundant around the cliff edges and common on the phosphate loader with daily counts of up to 250 roosting around the cove. **Red Junglefowl** was seen at various spots around the island in small numbers, as was the Asian race of **Intermediate Egret**. Along the forest trails and sometimes around settlement we found the local race of **Brown Goshawk** and after some rain two **Pacific Swift** circled the runway area for two days.



Above: **Common Noddy**



Above: Snorkelling in Flying Fish Cove

On our second last afternoon Biggles, Chris and Rosemary were driving near the detention centre when a cuckoo flushed from roadside trees in front of their car. We all drove to the site and walked the road without success. As we were just about to leave a small male goshawk flew into a nearby rainforest tree and out darted a hepatic **ORIENTAL CUCKOO**, which then briefly landed on a branch above the road before darting off at high speed, as Oriental Cuckoos tend to always do.

We finished the week on Christmas Island with repeated great views of the endemics and local specialties, as well as four vagrants. We arrived on Cocos for the second half of the tour and found it equally as dry as Christmas Island. Despite the conditions we found 120 **GREEN JUNGLEFOWL** on the first day as well as 90 **WHITE-BREASTED WATERHEN** and a lone **ORIENTAL PRATINCOLE**. We located a non-breeding pond heron near the rubbish dump which we initially thought would remain a slash bird, ie Javan/Chinese type but a closer look at some hi-res photos and increasingly closer views revealed it still had some small patches of orange at the base of the neck and was a **JAVAN POND HERON**.



Left: Javan Pond Heron (John Kyngdon)

The next day our target bird was Saunders's Tern. We travelled over to South Island and after a short walk found three of our targets on a distant sandbar. We set up our scopes and had distant views of three **SAUNDERS'S TERN** loafing on a small sandbar about to be covered by the incoming tide.

Often the terns are obliging and allow us to approach quite close but this time, after a few steps they alighted and were not seen again. We continued to scan the area and found a nice suite of waders, which included **Terek Sandpiper**, **Grey Plover** and Sanderling. We finished our time on South Island with some snacks, a few drinks and a swim in the lagoon.



Above: 3100km to Perth



The following day we searched the lagoon edge re-finding the non-breeding pond heron, as well as seven **Pied Stilt** and two **WESTERN REEF HERONS**, including one of the several piebald Western Reef Herons (**below**) that are scattered throughout the lagoon. We've noticed over the years that the Western Reef Herons are a much more aggressive bird than Eastern Reef Egret. They regularly chase other herons and harass any pond herons which may be present. Geof Christie has watched a Western Reef Heron chase and kill an Eastern Reef Egret on the banks of the inner lagoon. We'd missed Asian Koel on Christmas Island and unsuccessfully continued our search on West Island for what can sometimes be a very frustrating bird.



Late that afternoon we took a break from birding to attend a special occasion. One of the people on the tour decided to get married on Cocos. Ash and Kylie conduct barefoot beach weddings and Biggles and his lovely partner Giang decided to tie the knot during our tour on the lagoon beach. The island's administrator Natasha Griggs conducted the ceremony and we all attended the special occasion, followed by a couple of champagnes to celebrate. It was a delightful afternoon.



Above: Wedding Day

The following day we caught the ferry to Home Island where our target was Chinese Pond Heron. After a quick search of the grounds around Oceania House we began our walk to the southern tip of the island. We'd only walked 500m when I saw something small fly across the road up ahead. I said, "was that a bird or a grasshopper?" as large grasshoppers are plentiful on the island. A few meters later Chris Lester confirmed it was indeed a bird when he spotted a stunning little **GREY-STREAKED FLYCATCHER** in a roadside tree. Most of the migrant flycatchers that arrive on Cocos are shy and difficult to see but this first winter mega was incredibly cooperative, allowing lots of photos to be taken. Incredibly, every time over the next couple of days we'd walk towards it's favourite tree, it would fly out to greet us. Definitely the bird of the trip and an early candidate for bird of the summer.



Above: Grey-streaked Flycatcher

Our walk to the pond heron site was successful and before long the entire group had had nice views of a partial breeding plumaged **CHINESE POND HERON**. It certainly wasn't cooperative and we had to position ourselves behind some palm fronds and wait for twenty minutes but in that time it returned to its original location twice. It was on a Birding Tours Australia trip to Cocos in 2006 that we found Australia's first ever identifiable pond heron and now a decade later we're seeing both species in a fortnight, on the same tour!

With CPH in the bag and the local café opening just for our group, we departed for lunch and a productive afternoon session on the island. As we approached the flycatcher tree on the way to the café, Wendy briefly saw a thrush come up off the ground. We searched the area for a while but could not find the bird.



Above: Chinese Pond Heron South Island Cocos

After spending a considerable amount of time searching for Asian Koel on Christmas Island, our luck was finally changing with this species. We'd found a male **ASIAN KOEL** in Oceania House, followed quickly by a pair on the other side of Home Island. The following day we visited the farm on West Island where we saw another two males. While we finally had some perched views of this elusive species at the farm, word was trickling in from a few locals that a small bird had been seen on the golf course late yesterday afternoon. We drove to the 3rd hole and standing in the middle of the fairway was a cracking little **RED-THROATED PIPIT**. This much sort after long distance migrant proved to be very co-operative over the next few days, happily dodging golf balls and camera wielding birders as it chased insects on the fairway.



Above: Red-throated Pipit

We continued to search the island and flushed a cuckoo from tree near the runway. Unlike most migratory cuckoos, this one flew into a small tree and although remaining hidden in the foliage allowed us to approach close enough for photos. Through the foliage we could see the breast pattern which eliminated Hodgson's and as it moved around we got views of the tail, eliminating Indian Cuckoo. It allowed us to circle around the far side of the tree for photographs and to identify it as **Oriental Cuckoo**.



With a double-digit list of vagrants, five megas and great views of the local specialties, (except Saunders's Tern), it had been a great fortnight of birding with a great group comprising first timers, photographers and a couple of repeat visitors. Thankyou to everyone for an enjoyable fortnight and a special



thanks to Tania and Biggles for their logistical help as well as Lisa, Ash & Kylie, Ang, Shovel, Geof, Pam, Huyati and Natasha for contributing to the success of the tour.

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- 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.



DECEMBER 2018

With a full day of rain and a few days of strong northerly winds I was hoping it would bring a few birds out of the forest and a few more migrants to the island. I was at the airport to meet a keen group of birders off the Virgin flight, just about all of whom wanted to see the Grey-streaked Flycatcher and Red-throated Pipit from the previous week. Unfortunately, both birds had moved on and despite extensively searching both islands all week, neither were seen again.

Our first afternoon was spent visiting the local wetlands and doing a familiarisation drive around West Island for the first timers to the island. Our group was about 50/50 first time visitors and repeat visitors, a few of which were on their 5-10th trip.



Above: Green Junglefowl

The photographers in the group quickly set about nailing photos of **Green Junglefowl** and **White-breasted Waterhen**, which isn't as easy a task as it might seem. On our first full day on the island the group split into two. Of the seven days we would be on Cocos the tides on the sandflats were most conducive to seeing Saunders's Tern on day one. The first timers headed to South Island and after a short walk we located a group of **Saunders's Tern** on a sandbar only 200m from the forest. We firstly scoped the birds then crept slowly closer. Once everyone had good looks, some of us returned to the shade while the five photographers crept closer for some great photos. On the way back Darryl spotted a **COMMON REDSHANK** on the far bank, which caused a slight detour but we were soon back in the shade next to the lagoon, where we all had lunch and a celebratory glass of champagne or a beer. After lunch we had a cooling swim and even stopped for a spot of snorkelling on the way home.



Above: Saunders's Tern (Nick Thompson)

The other group, all of whom had seen the terns on previous trips, had ventured to Home Island for the day to search for the missing-in-action flycatcher. In recent years Home Island has delivered the goods and already this season it hadn't disappointed. The group had barely walked twenty metres off the jetty when they were stopped in their tracks by a spectacular **BLUE ROCK THRUSH**. With photos taken, it was back to task and the search for the flycatcher continued.



Above: Blue Rock Thrush (James Mustafa) Above: Saunders's Tern (Jim Sneddon)

The ferry doesn't run to Home Island on Sundays so we spent the next day on West Island. Rik from Cocos Tourism had photographed a Japanese Sparrowhawk eating a young White Tern in a tree in his back yard only the morning before. We staked out the area but failed to see anything. Geof Christie had more luck further along the island and photographed a **JAPANESE SPARROWHAWK** carrying two young White Terns into the palm forest. The sparrowhawk proved elusive all week and it wasn't until the last couple of days that a couple of members of the group got views of the bird. When we arrived there were nine white tern chicks in the trees at the back of the houses near Geof's place. By the end of the week they were all gone.



Above: Japanese Sparrowhawk carrying two baby White Terns (G.Christie) and White Tern.

Our full day on West Island proved to be productive with highlights being a **CHINESE SPARROWHAWK** seen in town, a **PIN-TAILED SNIPE** flushed from the runway verge, a piebald **Western Reef Heron** in the lagoon, a **Javan Pond Heron** at the garbage tip, two **Oriental Cuckoos** and four **Asian Koels**. Not a bad haul! More common species also seen over the weekend included **Red-footed Booby** (123), **Brown Booby** (1), **Green Junglefowl** (140), **White-breasted Waterhen** (100+), **White-tailed Tropicbird** (4), **Greater Frigatebird** (5), **Lesser Frigatebird** (25), **Asian Intermediate Egret** (7), **Asian Striated Heron** (2), **White Tern** (50) and **Asian Dollarbird** (1).

We all boarded the 6.30am ferry to Home Island on Monday morning for what turned out to be the biggest and most exciting day of the season so far. Some people had already seen the Blue Rock Thrush, so the group split up with half going for the thrush and the rest the flycatcher. I joined the rock thrush search and after an unsuccessful thirty minutes of searching, Rhonda Barrant spotted a flycatcher swoop across into the lower branches of a large tree near where the rock thrush was last seen. Surely it had to be the missing grey-streaked?

We quickly aborted the thrush search and surrounded a couple of large trees, which we peered into for an hour and a half without success. As we were about to give up, a call came over the radio from the mansion grounds of another bird seen, so we abandoned the flycatcher search and assembled in the grounds for what turned out to be a **Dollarbird**.

Glen and Tony decided to head off and go birding on the southern end of the island and they soon departed. While the rest of us stood around hatching a plan to search the island for vagrants, a large black, white and orange bird flew by and into a tree. James was first to see it and yelled out to the rest of us nearby. Only a couple of people saw in glide by.

James and I immediately walked around the back to try and flush it back across the garden. Our plan worked and it shot back across the grounds for just about all to see. Rob Shore once again proved fastest with a camera and managed to get a couple of shots which showed Australia's first ever **CHESTNUT-WINGED CUCKOO!**



Above and Below: Chestnut-winged Cuckoo (Rob Shore)

Everyone called on their radios at the same time to tell Glen and Tony to return. Glen replied, "What is it? where is it? Is it a mega? Where are you? Can you still see it? With five radios going at once, it was radio chaos. I grabbed my radio and only needed to say two words, "Glen RUN!" and so he did. By now he was a kilometre away and according to Tony, he dropped his backpack on the side of the road to lighten the load and took off like a startled gazelle.



For such a big bird it proved incredibly difficult to see high in the canopy. Even with twelve birders standing around the tree it couldn't be seen. It wasn't seen again that day and those that missed it had to spend the next two days searching the grounds for what was proving to be an incredibly cryptic bird. Eventually everyone had views of what is surely one of the most mega birds ever seen in Australia.

Before long it was time to catch the ferry back to West Island. Sue, Rob and James stayed on Home Island for the night in the hope of finding something at dusk or dawn. It was a well executed plan. As the sun began to set on the island and the rest of us were back at our accommodation, Rob located the second major rarity of the day.



Above: Siberian Thrush (Rob Shore)

A well known shy skulker that prefers dense forest understory, **SIBERIAN THRUSH** is a species that we would only ever find on Cocos, as the Christmas Island rainforest is far too thick. In the late afternoon it moved from the thick undergrowth to the lawn and open gardens. Rob quickly summonsed Sue and James and all three had cracking views. That night while we were doing the bird call back on West Island I got the message from the others, "Siberian thrush in the gardens!" Wow two cripplers in one day! The briefing for the next day was short and sweet, "6.30am ferry back to Home Island."



Above: Male and female Asian Koel and Oriental Cuckoo (J.Mustafa)

From the ferry we walked directly to Oceania House but luck wasn't on our side. Rob, Sue and James had seen the Sibe Thrush that morning but just ten minutes before we arrived the local gardener walked around the corner past the thrush and flushed it. We spread out and spent two hours combing the grounds seeing **Asian Koel**, **Dollarbird** and a **White-tailed tropicbird**, which had decided to nest in the garden and kept us entertained while we watched and waited.

Sue Abbotts, Tania and I decided to do a loop of the banana plantations and with lunch approaching we made a quick stop at the supermarket. As we walked to the café, I spotted a flycatcher dart between branches in the same tree we'd staked out the day before. Awesome, **BLUE & WHITE FLYCATCHER** and it was sitting out in the open this time. The next thirty minutes was the most hectic of the tour. We raced to the café where nearly the entire group had started lunch or at least ordered lunch. "Blue and White Flycatcher in the park near the jetty." Everyone stood up and abandoned their lunch, when James called over the radio, "I've got the Siberian Thrush near the garden gate." After a quiet and uneventful morning, we now had two megas in two different directions at the same time and an empty café.



Above: Blue & White/Zappey's Flycatcher (*Cyanoptila cyanomelana/cumatilis*)

Both birds were co-operative and some people managed to see both and get back to the restaurant before their lunch was ready. Like the Chestnut-winged Cuckoo, the Sibe Thrush was a new bird for everyone on the tour. The thrush remained in the gardens up until we departed a few days later and the beguiling little flycatcher happily posed for us for the next two days.

Back in 2014 we started considering the Blue & White/Zappy's Flycatcher split and started collecting photos of all previous records. Mike Carter conducted the review in 2015 and concluded that all birds sighted previously in Australia were Blue & White. Unfortunately it's a poorly delineated species, so I let everyone know on these tours

that most people put it on their list as Blue & White Flycatcher or Blue & White slash Zappey's Flycatcher and wait until the females and non-adult males can safely be separated, which is the same as what we did with the female Narcissus/Green-backed Flycatchers back in 2015-16.

We'd given Home Island our full attention and with two days remaining still had a couple of sightings to chase up on West Island, most importantly a **Hodgson's Hawk Cuckoo** which had been fleetingly seen around town over the last few days.

We'd found Australia's first Hodgson's Hawk Cuckoo on this tour in 2010 and for a few years after that they were regular on these tours on Cocos, then they stopped arriving. It was exciting news that one had returned and decided to occupy the trees at the back of the settlement.



Above: Hodgson's Hawk Cuckoo (Rob Shore)

Pam had managed to get some really nice photos of the Hodgson's near her back yard and it seemed to have a regular daily routine, flying through the neighbourhood late in the afternoon. With that in mind we arrived ready for a two hour stake-out at 4pm, only to hear that it completed its lap of the park area at 3.30pm, damn !

The next afternoon we arrived earlier and sat and waited. It was easy birding, sitting on the grass in the shade. Some of the more organised in the group bought beers for the wait, while others sat with cameras ready to roll in an instant.

There were a couple of false starts with two **Oriental Cuckoos** that made a habit of duplicating the Hodgson's flight path but those with patience were rewarded on the last afternoon when the **HODGSON'S HAWK CUCKOO** came past flying slowly into a headwind and allowing some stunning shots like those above by Rob Shore.

The following day we flew to Christmas Island where the first timers to the island started seeing new birds even before exiting the plane. Our tactics were simple. Those that had visited the island previously headed straight off in search of vagrants while I took everyone else to see the local specialties.



Above: Christmas Frigatebird



Above: Common Emerald Dove

Christmas Island has a good mix of endemics and local specialties. The local specialties are species that are found elsewhere in the World and even elsewhere in Australia and are easily seen on Christmas Island. For example **Common Emerald Dove** is found throughout most of South East Asia and is replaced by Pacific Emerald Dove in Australia. **Island Thrush** is found in parts of Asia, PNG and the Solomon Islands and the Christmas ssp has now been given full species status. Christmas Island is the only location in Australia where these species can be seen and we'd seen both species within 300m of our accommodation on the first afternoon.

Thousands of seabirds breed on the island and over the first two days we'd had good views of **Christmas Frigatebird**, **Great Frigatebird** and even had a couple of **Lesser Frigatebirds**. **Red-footed Booby** was common, constantly circling above the terraces, while **Brown Booby** was seen along the coastline and feeding out to sea, often with **Red-tailed Tropicbirds** nearby. **Common (Brown) Noddy** roosted on the bouys in the cove and a trip to a local lookout gave the photographers a chance to get some nice shots of both the white and golden morph of **White-tailed Tropicbird**.

For the final seabird we had to drive to the other side of the island and search the tallest trees on the plateau for **Abbott's Booby**. We spent two afternoons during the week at the site watching the birds in the trees and returning from their fishing forays.



It had been so dry this year that the annual crab migration was pretty much a non-event. Many of the roads that are usually closed at this time of year were open and over the next few days we explored the island, getting nice views of **Christmas Island White-eye** and **Christmas Island Imperial Pigeon**.

During our afternoon break in the heat of the day some people rested, others sorted their photos, some sat at the island's lookouts and took more photos and some of us went snorkelling. On Christmas Island you can park your car and swim straight off the beach onto coral reef. The photo below is a school of Convict Tang I took during a lunch time snorkel with John and Keith.



Although we'd seen **Java Sparrow** on our second morning the views weren't the best so we returned over the next three mornings until the photographers in the group had

the shots they needed. **Eurasian Tree Sparrow** was seen daily around settlement, as were the local race of **Brown Goshawk** and **Nankeen Kestrel**.



Above: Christmas Island Imperial Pigeon

We visited the sites where we'd seen nightjars in previous years but were unsuccessful this year. The following night we headed out into the forest after dinner in search of the local boobook owl. We hadn't tried the golf course for a few years and there had been a couple of recent reports of birds seen in the area, so we parked in the carpark and walked over to the forest.

Initially silent, except for the occasional frigatebird we listened for a while and could hear two **Christmas Boobooks** calling deep in the forest. We played the call and one approached closer and to our right. We walked 80m across the golf course, played the call again and soon after found the last of the Christmas Island endemics perched in a nearby tree. Photographs were taken and after it disappeared back into the forest, we returned to our apartments a happy bunch of birders.

Our last two afternoons were spent birding, sightseeing and snorkelling. The boat trip is in the calm protected waters on the northern side of the island and although an optional extra, the trip is often everyone's highlight of the week on CI.

As we cruised the coast we saw tens of thousands of seabirds and even had 500 birds soaring above the boat at one stage. Those that had a swim saw Giant Trevally, a wreck, coral reef and even briefly swam with a pod of Spinner Dolphin, while those on board took photos of their acrobatic leaps.



Above: Spinner Dolphin

It had been another successful tour with a great bunch of birders. We'd seen thirteen rarities and amongst those were a couple of incredible cripplers, most notably Australia's first **Chestnut-winged Cuckoo** and a co-operative **Siberian Thrush**. Everyone on the trip saw at least two new birds with most seeing between 20-40 new birds over the fortnight. I'd like to thank everyone for their teamwork and enthusiasm which made this trip so memorable, with a special thanks to Rob, Tanya and Glen for their logistical support.



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January 2019

Three weeks after the December trip finished, we began the January tour on Cocos with a mix of first timers, photographers and repeat visitors. In that three weeks a couple of new birds had arrived on the atoll. A Common Swift, a Dark-sided Flycatcher and a Western Osprey were all new arrivals.

These January trips are so popular because we already know where most of the vagrants are. Some move around and some have departed but most are where we found them in December and it's just a matter of re-visiting those sites. On our first afternoon we split into two groups. Most of the group came with me to see the **JAVAN POND HERON** and those that had seen it previously visited the wetlands. After seeing the pond heron we toured some of the island's better birding sites prior to receiving a message from Damian that the **NORTHERN PINTAIL** was at the wetlands. We spent the next hour birding a very dry wetland.



Above: Northern Pintail - centre

It didn't take long to see our first **WESTERN REEF EGRET** in the lagoon shallows and of course **Green Junglefowl** and **White-breasted Waterhen** were plentiful. A couple of **Lesser Frigatebird** were seen cruising over head and **White Terns** patrolled the skies.

Our second day was our first day on Home Island and our main target was the Chestnut-winged Cuckoo that we found on the December tour.



Above: Birding from the top deck (Damian Baxter)

It wasn't long after entering the grounds of Oceania House that we had our first views of a female **ASIAN KOEL**. It sat in the canopy for long enough for most of the group to see it and take some photos. Only two people missed it but they'd have more opportunity later in the week.

As we searched the grounds for another hour, Jenny Spry photographed a **MALAY NIGHT HERON** fly across the clearing and into the canopy. We staked out the tree for a while but it slipped out the back unseen.



The next morning we arrived at the end of the lagoon and after a short wait located the **COMMON SWIFT** that had arrived between tours. It circled above the palm trees and occasionally out over the beach. As with many swifts, it proved difficult to photograph but by the end of the week we'd spent a couple of hours at the site and it was well photographed.

We'd visited the end of the runway several times searching for the osprey without success. A couple of people in the group had seen it from a distance but each time we looked it wasn't there. On the third morning we decided to make it our main target and all of us drove to the end of the runway ready to spend a couple of hours waiting and searching. We stopped at the site and found the Asian race of **Intermediate Egret** and only after five minutes, Damian spotted the **WESTERN OSPREY** on a sandbank devouring a fish. We got some distant photos and slowly crept closer until it took its fish to the far end of the lagoon and out of site.



Above and Below, Western Osprey (D.Baxter)



In December we searched long and hard for Hodgson's Hawk Cuckoo. We spent well over twelve hours staking out its flight path and even then a couple of people still missed it. January couldn't have been any different. The cuckoo had moved into smaller bushes to feed on caterpillars and the group simply walked up to the bushes and obligingly the **HODGSON'S HAWK CUCKOO** flew around and landed on the top of a bush for all to see.



Above: Hodgson's Hawk Cuckoo (D.Baxter)

Monday morning we were all on the 6.30am ferry to Home Island and straight to Oceania House to continue our search for the elusive cuckoo. A short stop at the southern gate produced a male **Asian Koel** which jumped between trees long enough to give the two people that missed the female on Saturday a chance to see the species for the first time.



Asian Dollarbird (D.Baxter)

From there we entered the garden and spent the next two hours combing the grounds for vagrants. We had a couple of sightings of Asian **Dollarbird** and **White-tailed Tropicbird** before the **Malay Night Heron** was sighted in the top of a tree. The group approached the tree and much to the delight of the group it flushed into another tree and walked along a branch in front for all to see. Lots of photos were taken and it was a new bird for most of the group.

John Stirling spotted a probable flycatcher in a tree near the hospital so we spent the rest of the afternoon sitting in the shade staking out a strand of callophyllum trees but after two hours of scanning we had to make a dash for the ferry back to West Island.

The following morning, we were back on Home Island for a walk across the channel to see **CHINESE POND HERON**, while the rest of the group had an unsuccessful search for yesterday's mystery bird.

The following day Geoff, Alwyn and Damian went back for better photos of the **Chinese Pond Heron**. They got some nice photos but the real prize came as they walked back to Oceania House. On the way back they flushed the **CHESTNUT-WINGED CUCKOO** from a roadside bush and had great views in good light as it flew down the road away from them. [Below: Western Reef Egret](#)



Over the next couple of days we continued to search for vagrants as well return for better looks and photographs of the birds we'd found earlier, such as the Common swift.

A walk along the runway verge produced two **Pin-tailed Snipe** which darted through the coastal scrub and out of sight. These were the only two we saw all week. We had more success with **Swinhoe's Snipe**. Last year we recorded our first ever Swinhoe's Snipe on Cocos, which was also the first non Pin-tailed Snipe ever recorded. This year's bird was in the same spot as the previous years. Surely it must have been the same bird back again?

Our trip to South Island was a great day with fourteen **SAUNDERS'S TERN** putting on a terrific close up display which included diving for fish and hovering above the photographer's heads. After several hundred photos were taken of the terns we walked across the sandflats and found an equally co-operative **COMMON REDSHANK**, which fed in the shallows with a couple of Grey-tailed Tattlers, seemingly oblivious to our presence.



Above: Common Redshanks (Damian Baxter)

We finished off our incredibly successful week on Cocos with a nice beach BBQ on the side of the lagoon. The following day we flew to Christmas Island where a whole bunch of endemics and local specialties awaited.





Over the week we covered many of the island's roads and explored the national park. The photographers divided their time between local cliff-top lookouts, photographing passing seabirds and the forest where several of the endemics live. **Christmas Island Thrush** were plentiful, as were **Christmas Island Swiftlet**, **Christmas Island White-eye** and **Christmas Island Imperial Pigeon**.

Common Emerald Dove were found on the rainforest trails and the local race of **Brown Goshawk** was periodically sighted around town. **Eurasian Tree Sparrows** were also easily seen near our accommodation but **Java Sparrows** proved a tad more elusive. Our first morning's search was unsuccessful, so on day two we visited a couple of sites they're known to visit, eventually finding them at a location we haven't seen them for a couple of years.

Our next target was the endemic **Abbott's Booby**, which required a drive to the other side of the island. We found a pair on a nest at the first stop and then another further down the road. While we photographed birds on the nest others started to fly past returning from their fishing trips.





Above: Christmas Frigatebird

As we travelled around the island we had nice views of **Red-footed Booby**, **Christmas Frigatebird**, **Great Frigatebird**, **Brown Booby**, **Red-tailed Tropicbird** and of course the incredible golden **White-tailed Tropicbird**.

We spent half a day on the protected waters of the northern coast where we had exceptional views of an Abbott's Booby circling the boat and even landing on the water.



Above: Abbott's Booby

The last bird of the trip was a **Pin-tailed Snipe** found in a grassy area in the centre of the island. Most of the group missed this species on Cocos and it was relief to connect with it on Christmas Island. We finished the fortnight with a final night dinner around the pool. Thanks to everyone for a great trip and particularly Jenny, Glen and Damian for their assistance.

Birdlist Summer 2018-19

Red Junglefowl – Seen only on CI.

Green Junglefowl – Common on Cocos

Pacific Black Duck – Up to 70 seen on Cocos.
Northern Pintail - Seen on Cocos
Wedge-tailed Shearwater – Observed whilst sea watching on Cocos
Red-tailed Tropicbird – Common on CI
White-tailed Tropicbird – Common on both islands.
Abbott's Booby – Common on CI.
Red-footed Booby – Abundant on CI.
Brown Booby – Abundant on CI.
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*) - Seen on both islands
Chinese Pond Heron - Seen on Cocos.
Javan Pond Heron - A single bird seen on Cocos.
Striated Heron – Seen on both islands.
Nankeen Night Heron – Abundant on Cocos.
Malayan Night Heron - One bird seen on Cocos
Yellow Bittern - Seen on Cocos and another on Christmas Island.
Western Osprey – **Seen on Cocos**
Brown (CI) Goshawk – Common on CI.
Chinese Sparrowhawk - **One bird seen on Cocos.**
Japanese Sparrowhawk – **One bird seen on Cocos**
Peregrine Falcon (*calidis*) seen on CI.
Nankeen Kestrel – Common on CI.
White-breasted Waterhen – Abundant on Cocos & several on CI.
Buff-banded Rail – Seen on Direction Island
Pin-tailed Snipe - Two seen on Cocos and once on CI
Swinhoe's Snipe – Two birds on Cocos.
Bar-tailed Godwit – Cocos
Eastern Curlew - Cocos
Whimbrel – Cocos
Common Greenshank – Cocos
Common Redshank – **One bird seen on Cocos**
Common Sandpiper – Both islands in small numbers.
Grey-tailed Tattler – Cocos
Ruddy Turnstone – Cocos
Red-necked Stint – Cocos
Sanderling – Cocos
Curlew Sandpiper – Cocos
Grey Plover – Cocos
Pacific Golden Plover – Seen on Cocos.
Lesser Sandplover – Cocos
Greater Sandplover – Cocos
Pied Stilt – One on CI and 7 on Cocos.
Oriental Pratincole – Seen on Cocos

Red-necked Phalarope- seen on Cocos

Lesser Crested Tern – Seen on Cocos.

Saunders's Tern - Up to 14 birds seen on 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.

Hodgson's Hawk Cuckoo – Seen on Cocos

Oriental Cuckoo – One on CI and several on Cocos.

Chestnut-winged Cuckoo – One individual on Cocos

CI Glossy Swiftlet – Abundant on Christmas Island.

Pacific Swift – Seen on both islands in small numbers

Common Swift - Cocos

Dollarbird – Three individuals seen on Cocos.

Grey-streaked Flycatcher – One bird seen on Cocos.

Blue and White type Flycatcher – One bird seen on Cocos.

Eye-browed Thrush - A lone bird seen on Cocos.

Siberian Thrush – Seen on Cocos

Eastern Yellow Wagtail – seven birds seen on CI.

Red-throated Pipit – A single bird seen on Cocos.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow – Common on CI

Java Sparrow – Small numbers on CI

Barn Swallow – Seen on both islands.

Christmas Island White-eye – Abundant on CI.

Island Thrush – Abundant on CI.

FUTURE TRIPS

Trip No. 42 - Nov 2019 - 14 days. The best trip for photographers and first timers. \$4500pp Twin.

Trip No. 43 - Dec 2019 - 14 days. Our annual tour for local specialties and vagrants. \$4500pp Twin.

Trip No. 44 - Jan 2020 - 14 days. Our Summer school holidays trip to both islands. \$4500pp Twin.

Trip No. 45 - Jan 2020 – 8 days. Our short end of season trip visiting both islands. \$3500pp Twin.

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.

