

Notes on Solomon Island birds

by D. Gibbs

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Between January and April 1994 I spent nearly three months in the Solomon Islands (this does not include Bougainville, which is politically part of Papua New Guinea; see Fig. 1). During this time I visited every island in the country with endemic species of birds. As these islands are rarely visited by bird-watchers many of the species seen are little known. Here I record some of my more interesting observations.

In the systematic list that follows, taxonomy at species level follows Sibley & Monroe (1990). Species endemic to the Solomon Islands are indicated by (E); species endemic to the Solomon Islands as geographically and formerly politically recognised (i.e. including Bougainville) are followed by (B).

HEINROTH'S SHEARWATER *Puffinus heinrothi*

Two or three birds feeding in the evening with Noddy *Anous* flocks off Kolombangara. Nearly all recent visitors have seen the species there, which strongly suggests breeding in the area.

GREAT CORMORANT *Phalacrocorax carbo*

The locals informed me that it now breeds in large numbers on the lake on Rennell island.

SANFORD'S EAGLE *Haliaeetus sanfordi* (B)

Still widespread; seen on Malaita, Makira and Choiseul. Remains fairly common on latter.

ORIENTAL HOBBY *Falco severus*

One seen on Choiseul is the second record for the island. Probably more frequent than old records suggest.

BUFF-BANDED RAIL *Gallirallus philippensis*

Common on Nendo, Santa Cruz, where not previously recorded, relatively bright individuals with a poorly developed orange-buff breast band; probably closest to *G. p. sethsmithi* of Vanuatu. A rail seen running across the road on Malaita was most likely this species but views were poor.

ROVIANA RAIL *G. rovianae* (E)

This species, only described in 1991, is known from a single specimen collected in 1977 near Munda on New Georgia, from several unspecified observations and from reports from locals. On Kolombangara it is well known to the locals and common in scrub, overgrown coconut plantations and other degraded habitats. In early

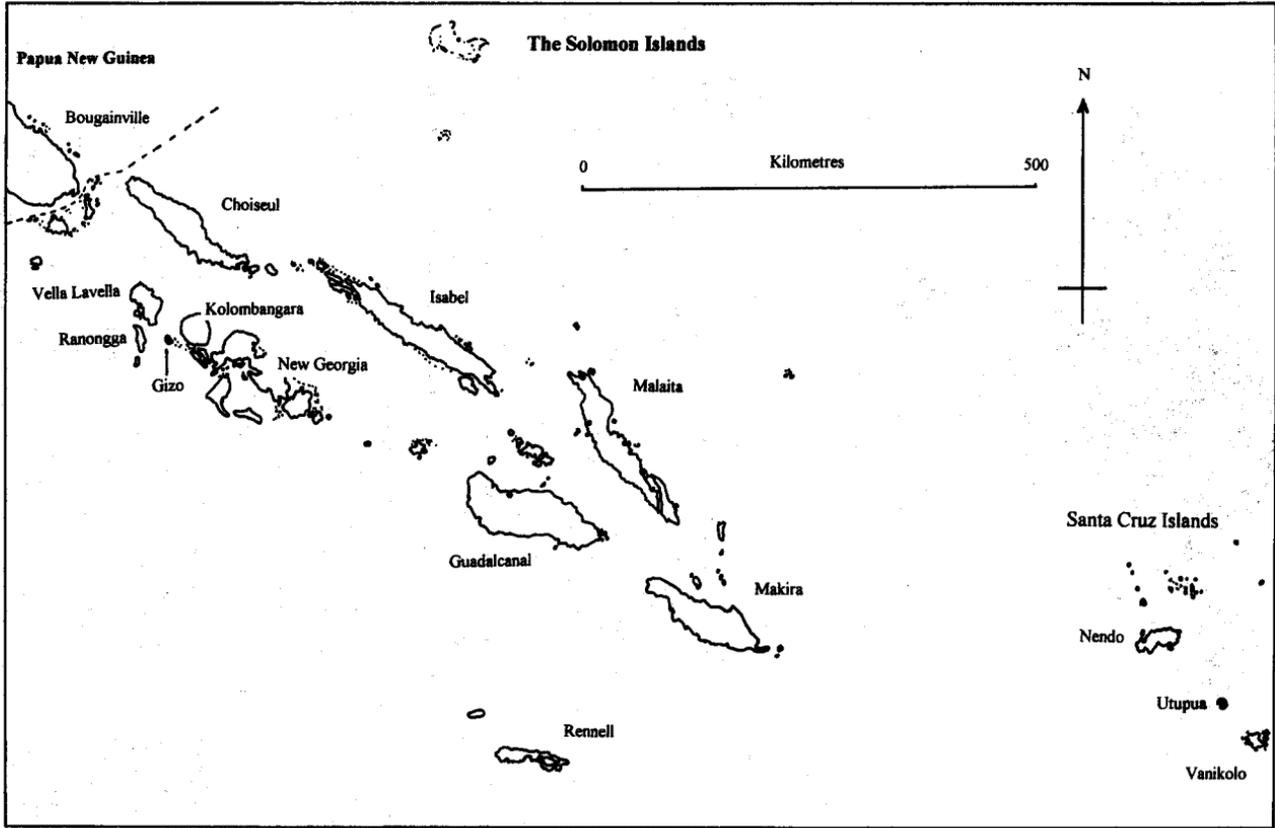


Figure 1. The Solomon Islands.

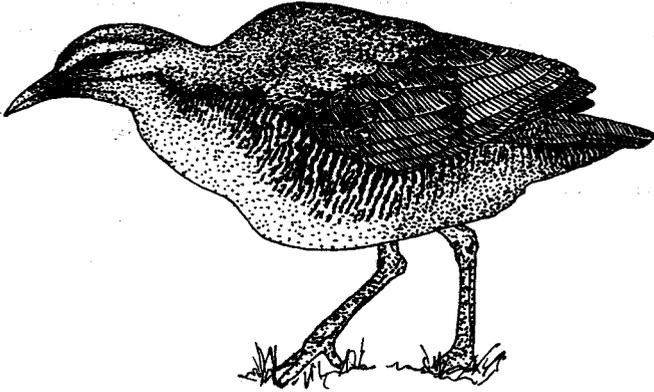


Figure 2. Roviana Rail *Gallirallus roivanae*.

morning they regularly venture out into the open but disappear into the scrub as soon as the sun hits the clearing. Once under cover they become impossible to see but can still be heard. On one morning I watched four birds wandering about on a grassy airstrip, one venturing into the centre of the strip. When disturbed they ran fast with head down, not showing the slightest tendency to use their wings. Although I call these birds (Fig. 2) *G. roivanae* they were quite different from the New Georgia bird described by Diamond (1991), and clearly belong to a distinct undescribed race. Rather darker than the nominate form, especially the underparts which are dark grey very finely barred black and white on sides of neck, flanks and under tail coverts. Lacks buff breast band. Observations of Woodford's Rail *Nesoclopeus woodfordi* on Kolombangara almost certainly refer to this form of *G. roivanae*.

CHESTNUT-BELLIED IMPERIAL PIGEON *Ducula brenchleyi* (E)

Only seen on Makira, two at 100 m above sea level. All recent records come from Makira where it would appear it is declining rapidly.

ORIENTAL CUCKOO *Cuculus saturatus*

One seen on Choiseul is the second for the island.

MOUSTACHED KINGFISHER *Actenoides bougainville* (B)

The Guadalcanal race is known from just three specimens, the last collected in 1953. Never observed by bird-watchers, this species was presumed to be very rare. It is well known in local folklore but none but the oldest villagers have ever seen it. Together with six villagers from Betilonga (now abandoned), I attempted to find the now forgotten route into the mountains used by Cain and Galbraith's hunters in 1953. With the aid of a topographical map and compass we took three days to cut a path up to 1100 m, where we camped. That evening two *A. bougainvillei* called briefly but I could not see or record them. From

this camp we explored the higher altitudes. Although I heard the kingfisher every morning and evening the only one I saw was a female at 1325 m. The adult male plumage of this race is unknown so I am assuming my bird was a female because it had an olive mantle as in the female of the Bougainville race (blue in the male). Although the bird was paler on the underparts it was certainly not as pale as the specimen illustrated in Fry *et al.* (1992), and indeed was closer to the illustration of female *A. b. bougainvillei*. This bird gave itself away only by the faint noise of its wings as it moved perches, which it did rarely. While perched about 2 m off the ground it slowly pumped its tail but was otherwise almost motionless and sometimes appeared to be asleep. Possibly it is crepuscular.

BLACK-FACED PITTA *Pitta anerythra* (B)

Although frequently collected in the early part of the 20th century, this bird has not been observed by recent bird-watchers. I found it to be fairly common on Isabel in hills to 600 m, frequenting old overgrown gardens and secondary forest. It is well known to the locals all of whom are very familiar with the bird's call, although very few people have ever seen it. It can often be found in degraded habitats very close to villages and many people hear it from their house every morning and evening. Apparently it calls all year round. It is exceedingly elusive and the three individuals I saw only came into view with the help of play-back. Even then slight movement was enough to frighten it away. It calls on, or up to 20 m above, the ground for about an hour at dawn and dusk. From one garden three calling birds could be heard simultaneously.

SAN CRISTOBAL THRUSH *Zoothera margaretae* (E)

Once the call was learnt this very secretive bird (Fig. 3) proved to be frequent on Makira in montane forest at 200–600 m. I attempted to attract several with play-back and three individuals responded and came into view, one showing well but, although approaching very close, still proved difficult to see for long. The call is a very high-pitched descending whistle typical of the genus, the song a simple and tuneless series of clicking and grating notes and short whistles.

GUADALCANAL THRUSH *Z. turipavae* (E)

Known only from the type collected in 1953 in mist forest above 1000 m south of Betilonga on Guadalcanal, this taxon was treated as a subspecies of *Z. margaretae* by Cain & Galbraith. Descriptions suggest that their specimen was an immature; no field data accompanied it. My observation of one singing bird at 1450 m (Fig. 3), and observations of *Z. margaretae*, leave me in no doubt that these two taxa are quite distinct species. Like *Z. margaretae* it is very secretive but not shy. Description: generally sooty-brown; lacking obvious spots on upper-wing coverts and on tertials; pale patch in wing washed buff and very inconspicuous; flanks greyish, feathers of underparts broadly edged darker producing a pattern of streaked flanks and boldly black scaled breast and belly; centre of belly paler; under tail coverts buffy; legs

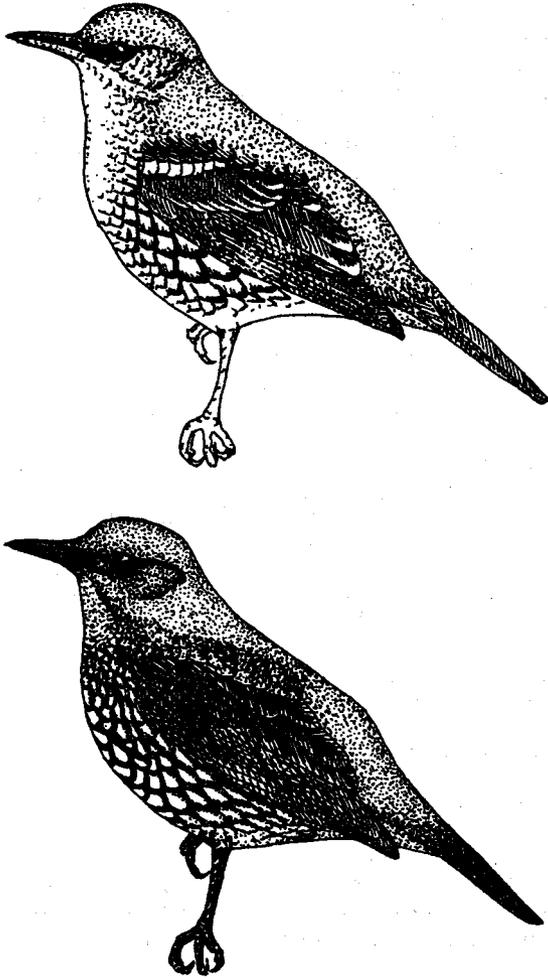


Figure 3. San Cristobal Thrush *Zoothera margaretae* (upper) and Guadalcanal Thrush *Z. turipavae* (lower).

blackish, bill black, eye dark. Call as *Z. margaretae*; song very distinct from that of *Z. margaretae*, a long, loud and melodious series of trills and repeated modulated whistles occasionally including the call note.

GUADALCANAL THICKETBIRD *Megalurulus whitneyi*

In the Solomons known from a single specimen collected in 1953 in "mist forest". I saw one in dense bamboo scrub in the moss forest at 1550 m. This very secretive species is probably not uncommon in suitable habitat above this altitude.

MALAITA FANTAIL *Rhipidura malaitae* (E)

Known only from the type series collected in 1930. I saw a single bird (possibly another present nearby) at 1100 m in the mountains of central Malaita. My local guide said it was usually seen when crossing the mountain from 900 m to the summit of the path, but not below this altitude. The bird I saw was in a mixed flock including the far more abundant *R. rufifrons*.

KOLOMBANGARA MONARCH *Monarcha browni* (E)

The race *M. b. nigrotecta* of Vella Lavella, which is probably best regarded as a distinct species, is rather uncommon in secondary forest and gardens.

VANIKORO MONARCH *Mayrornis schistaceus*

The remote island of Vanikolo (formerly known as Vanikoro) has not been visited in recent years, so the status of this bird remained unknown. I found it to be common in secondary scrub and forest, from sea-level to at least 270 m.

COMMON GOLDEN WHISTLER *Pachycephala pectoralis*

This species shows extraordinary variation, in both plumage and vocalisations, throughout the Solomons. However, with one exception, all the very different songs were easily ascribable to this species on first hearing them. The single exception is the hen-feathered *P. p. feminina* of Rennell Island. I was quite unable to recognise it until it came into view, and even then I had difficulty convincing myself that the bird was *P. pectoralis*. This form certainly deserves allospecific status.

MALAITA MYZOMELA *Myzomela malaitae* (E)

Gardens, forest, commonest in hills.

GUADALCANAL HONEYEATER *Guadalcanaria inexpectata* (E)

Fairly common at 1450–1565 m in the mountains south of Betilonga, especially in moss forests where it is conspicuous.

BANDED WHITE-EYE *Zosterops vellalavella* (E)

This, the only endemic on Vella Lavella, is common in scrub and forest edge.

GANONGGA WHITE-EYE *Zosterops splendidus* (E)

This, the only endemic on Ranongga (formerly known as Ganongga), is common in scrub, gardens and secondary forest.

SPLENDID WHITE-EYE *Zosterops luteirostris* (E)

Endemic to the virtually deforested island of Gizo and considered vulnerable, but I found it in reasonable numbers whenever I looked for it not far from Gizo town. It appears to have adapted well to scrub and secondary growth.

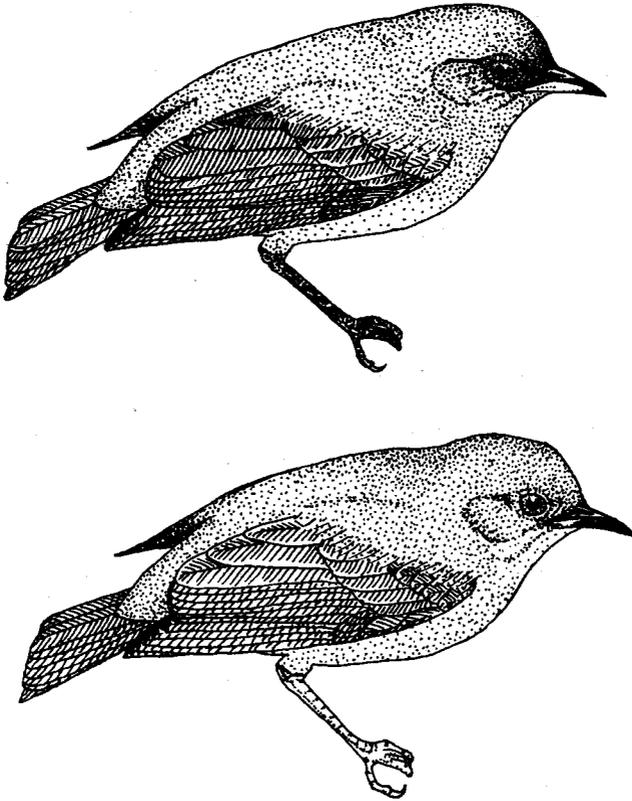


Figure 4. Santa Cruz White-eye *Zosterops sanctaegrucis* (upper) and Vanikolo White-eye *Zosterops* sp.

SANTA CRUZ WHITE-EYE *Zosterops sanctaegrucis* (E)

As no bird-watchers have visited the Santa Cruz islands recently the status of this bird (Fig. 4) remained unknown. It is common in scrub, gardens and forest.

VANIKOLO WHITE-EYE *Zosterops* sp.

No member of this genus has ever been reported from Vanikolo. During my brief visit to the island I observed *Zosterops* twice, a group of three not associated with other species and a single bird in a mixed-species flock, in forest and natural secondary growth at 140–175 m. I did not explore much higher than this. All four of these birds were low down and gave very good, close views (Fig. 4). It is probably not uncommon so it is surprising that the species has never been collected. This taxon is closely allied to *Z. sanctaegrucis* being the same size and shape. Bill a little more slender. Plumage all dull olive,

perhaps a little brighter than *Z. sanctaerucis*. Some individuals slightly yellower on throat. Lores concolorous with head. Eye-ring completely absent, no more than a narrow rim of yellowish-grey bare skin surrounding the eye. Bill black with small area of fleshy-yellow at base of lower mandible, smaller than in *Z. sanctaerucis*; looks entirely black in all but the closest views. Iris dark brown. Legs entirely yellowish-orange. Call a soft churring.

SANFORD'S WHITE-EYE *Woodfordia lacertosa* (E)

Appears to be restricted to original forest. The only such habitat I visited on Nendo, Santa Cruz Islands, was badly degraded and small in extent, but several birds were seen in a few hours.

WHITE-EYED STARLING *Aplonis brunneicapilla* (B)

Only known from Bougainville, Rendova (south of New Georgia) and Guadalcanal, where it is very local but may be plentiful where it does occur. I did not locate it on Guadalcanal but saw several in northern Choiseul where it has not previously been recorded. One or two were often seen with flocks of Metallic Starlings *A. metallica* in and around gardens cut out of the primary forest, the full plumaged birds showing the conspicuous elongated central tail feathers as they flew over, much longer than seen in *A. metallica*. In many birds these long tail feathers are lacking or broken. When perched they are seen to be slightly more heavily built than *A. metallica* with oily-black head and neck, remainder of body plumage shiny green. Bill very obviously heavy with a strongly curved culmen. The pearly-white eye is clearly visible when the bird is at rest and even with good flight views. Immatures are dark-eyed but have the same bill shape. No distinctive calls were recognised.

Acknowledgement

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