

Birding Ecotours



NEW CALEDONIA: KAGU AND OTHER ENDEMIC SET DEPARTURE TRIP REPORT

10 - 15 DECEMBER 2018

By Andy Walker



*We had plenty of great views of the magnificent, flightless endemic **Kagu** during the tour.*

Overview

This short and highly successful New Caledonia set departure group tour followed our Western Australia tour (see [here](#) for trip report). The tour started in Nouméa on the 10th of December 2018 and concluded back there on the 15th of December 2018. The tour focused on (and was successful in) finding all of the endemic birds found on Grande Terre, the main and largest island of New Caledonia, as well as several regional endemic species and a number of distinct subspecies that may warrant full species status in the future.

A total of 62 bird species were seen (plus one species heard only). Full species lists are provided at the end of this report. The main highlight bird seen was undoubtedly **Kagu**, the endemic, Endangered (BirdLife International), and flightless bird that is the main reason most birders come to New Caledonia. We had some amazing views of a group of five birds all feeding together and then having a bit of a territorial dispute which involved a lot of posturing, crest flaring, and hissing sounds! It was a magical experience to witness at such close range.

We had several other major highlights during the tour, none as incredible as finding **New Caledonian Thicketbird**, a species teetering on the edge of existence and easily the most difficult of the country's endemic species to track down and then actually see. This is a mega-skulker, and we were over the moon to get good views of one. Another huge highlight of the tour involved two sightings of the Critically Endangered (BirdLife International) **Crow Honeyeater**, an endemic species in fairly-rapid decline and far from easy these days, unfortunately. Additional major highlights included great views of nesting **White-bellied Goshawk** and multiple sightings of the tool-making **New Caledonian Crow**, an intriguing species to observe foraging.

Other, no-less-impressive endemics seen well on multiple occasions included **Cloven-feathered Dove**, **Goliath Imperial Pigeon**, **Horned Parakeet**, **New Caledonian Parakeet**, **New Caledonian Cuckooshrike**, **New Caledonian Whistler**, **Green-backed White-eye**, **Barred Honeyeater**, **New Caledonian Myzomela**, **New Caledonian Friarbird**, **Yellow-bellied Flyrobin**, **Striated Starling**, and **Red-throated Parrotfinch**.

Plenty of other regional endemics were also seen, such as **South Melanesian Cuckooshrike**, **Melanesian Flycatcher**, **Southern Shrikebill**, **Long-tailed Triller**, **Grey-eared Honeyeater**, **Fan-tailed Gerygone**, and **Streaked Fantail**. We also found a rarity in the form of **White-browed Crane!**

Detailed Report

Day 0, 9th December 2018. Pre-tour arrival in Nouméa, New Caledonia

Andy and Tom arrived in Nouméa, New Caledonia, and transferred to their comfortable beachside hotel after having traveled to Nouméa from Perth (via Sydney), Australia, after completing our set-departure Western Australia: Southwest Specialties tour.

After checking into our hotel the afternoon was spent at leisure (maybe listening to and watching the **Grey-eared Honeyeater** and **Coconut Lorikeets** that are so common here) ahead of the tour starting the next day.

Day 1, 10th December 2018. Tour started, birding at Mount Koghi

Our first day birding in New Caledonia was spent at Mount Koghi, not far from the capital city of Nouméa. The forest here offers some great birds, and we got our trip off to a great start with **Barred Honeyeater**, **Grey-eared Honeyeater**, and **Striated Startling** in the parking lot. As we entered the forest we found **Rufous Whistler** and **South Melanesian Cuckooshrike** and could hear the distinctive sound of the huge **Goliath Imperial Pigeon** echoing around the forest. As the day progressed we had some great views of several of them (these are the largest arboreal pigeons in the world!). We also heard the distinctive sound of **Cloven-feathered Dove** as one flew through. Small passerines were all very vocal, and we had plenty of repeated views of **New Caledonian Whistler**, **Yellow-bellied Flyrobin**, **Green-backed White-eye**, **Fan-tailed Gerygone**, **Streaked** and **Grey Fantails**, **New Caledonian Myzomela**, **Melanesian Flycatcher**, and **Southern Shrikebill** giving amazing views.



*For a first-ever view of **Southern Shrikebill** we could not have asked for better views as this bird showed remarkably well for a prolonged period.*

One of the reasons that these birds were all very vocal and wary was because there was a pair of the rare, endemic **White-bellied Goshawk** breeding in the forest. This is a really beautiful accipiter, and it was great to get some prolonged and repeated views of them. We were able to watch some very interesting behavior, as it appeared as though the pair were doing a food-swap with the male bringing prey to the female, who would then take it to the nest.

Other birds seen during the course of the day included **Fan-tailed Cuckoo**, **Shining Bronze Cuckoo**, **Sacred Kingfisher**, **Satin Swiftlet**, **White-rumped Swiftlet**, and (brief views of) **New Caledonian Parakeet**. Both cuckoos are potential future splits, so it was good to find both of them.

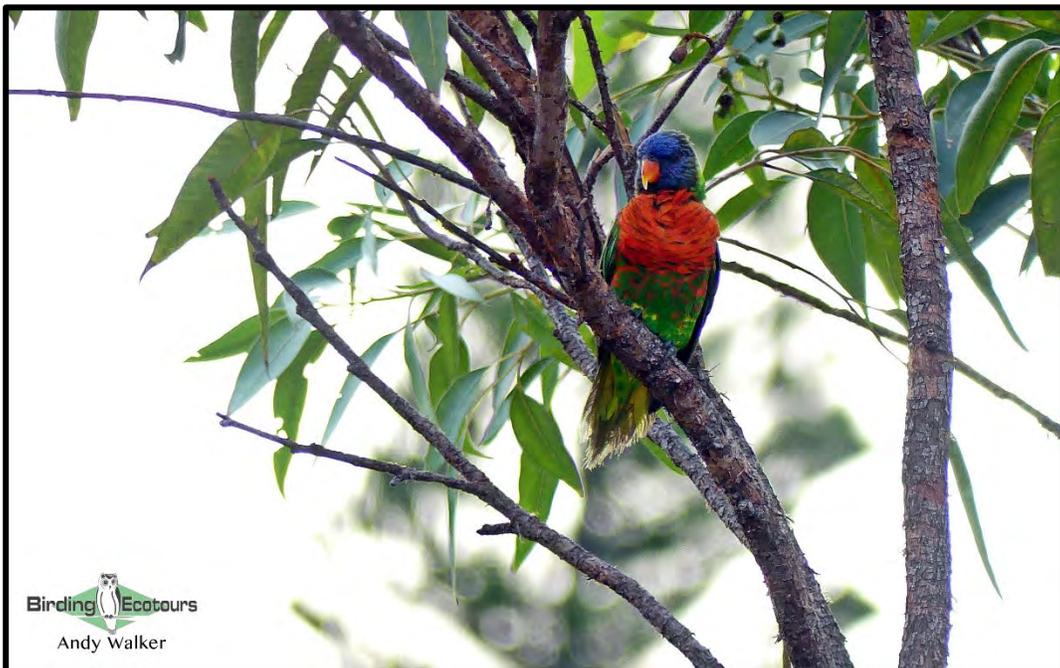
While driving back to our hotel late in the afternoon we saw the introduced **Common Waxbill**, to go along with the introduced **House Sparrow**, **Spotted Dove**, **Common Myna**, and **Red-vented Bulbul** we had seen during the day.



*We had some amazing views of a pair of nesting **White-bellied Goshawks**, definitely the highlight species of our first day's birding in the country.*

Day 2, 11th December 2018. Parc de la Rivière Bleue

As we ate breakfast on the beach we were surrounded by a range of introduced species and also more local ones in the form of **Coconut Lorikeets** and **Silver Gulls**. After breakfast we hit the road and headed southeast to the Parc de la Rivière Bleue, seeing **Whistling Kite** and **Swamp Harrier** along the way.



***Coconut Lorikeet** is the common parrot in New Caledonia, but it is very attractive.*

We had one target in mind and so went straight for that first. As we entered the forest full of anticipation we didn't need to worry, as in no time at all we were watching our first **Kagu**. This is always a special moment. Kagu is probably one of the most highly-sought species in New Caledonia (if not in the whole world!), and so it is always great when the first one walks into view. We spent a good hour or so in the company of not just one, but five **Kagus**. It was fascinating watching them as they foraged in the leaf litter for a range of insects (and larger prey like lizards). While we were watching them all of a sudden three of the birds ran toward each other and had a bit of a face-off. They stood up tall with crests erected and wings out, showing their incredible wing patterns. They proceeded to hiss at each other and maintained that position for a while. An amazing sight!



Kagu: simply magnificent!

It's always tough to pull yourself away from watching a Kagu, more so a group of them! But we needed to move on as the temperature was soaring and we could hear the constant noise generated by several **New Caledonian Friarbirds**, so we took some time to watch them, as this was our first proper view of them of the tour. As we started to move away from the friarbirds we heard the distinctive call of a **Crow Honeyeater**. This species is Critically Endangered and in a state of rapid decline. However, luck was on our side as one flew in and across the road, allowing an all-to-brief glimpse. It was frustrating yet thrilling to see that the species is persisting here. It moved on and unfortunately wasn't relocated.

We moved to another section of the forest and found **Goliath Imperial Pigeon**, **New Caledonian Whistler**, a very brief **New Caledonian Cuckooshrike**, **Satin** and **White-rumped Swiftlets**, **Melanesian Flycatcher**, and several other species. We also had further looks at a few more **Kagus**! Eventually it was time to return to the car and head back into Nouméa after a really enjoyable day.

Day 3, 12th December 2018. Parc de la Rivière Bleue

The lure of what we had seen the previous day was too hard to resist, so we headed to Parc de la Rivière Bleue once more. Again, in no time at all we were watching **Kagus**, at least five of them, to be precise. We again spent some time watching them go about their morning activities and after a while decided to move on ourselves and see what else we could find. This proved to be a good plan, and straight away we were rewarded by finding a pair of **New Caledonian Cuckooshrikes** (much better views than on the previous day), quickly followed by discovering a nesting pair of **Yellow-bellied Flyrobins**. A bit further along the road we found one of those highly-sought endemics - **New Caledonian Crow**. This bird was out foraging and had its tool (a small twig) in its bill as it was digging into small crevices for insect prey. Fascinating to watch this behavior! A short while later we were watching **New Caledonian Myzomela**, **New Caledonian Friarbird**, and **Melanesian Flycatcher**, all very nice birds.



*This pair of nesting **Yellow-bellied Flyrobins** had the whole forest to choose a nest site, yet they chose to build their nest right next to the road! We weren't complaining, though, as it gave us a great opportunity to observe this rather cute endemic.*

In the midmorning a young couple came walking past us. They had binoculars and a Kagu primary feather, a rare find! I asked if I could photograph it, which I did, and as I was taking a photo a sharp call behind me caused me to swing around, where I found two **Crow Honeyeaters** suddenly sitting not 12 feet away from us! Panic stations as these two Critically Endangered honeyeaters moved through the bushes before flying over our heads and away. With a bit of juggling of the kagu feather, camera, tripod, and a few other things it was possible to grab a quick record shot. Amazed, we were extremely happy to have got some great views of these rare birds before they vanished as quickly as they had materialized.



*Only a record shot, but one of a very rare bird, **Crow Honeyeater**, a Critically Endangered New Caledonian endemic.*



*Positively glowing, the male **New Caledonian Myzomela**, a tiny endemic honeyeater that was quite numerous during our walk.*

Over the course of the rest of the morning and early afternoon we added several species to our day lists, such as **Goliath Imperial Pigeon**, **Metallic Pigeon**, **Barred Honeyeater**, **Grey-eared Honeyeater**, **New Caledonian Whistler**, **Streaked Fantail**, and **New Caledonian Parakeet**, as well as getting plenty of further views of species such as **Yellow-bellied Flyrobin**, **Melanesian**

Flycatcher, and **New Caledonian Myzomela**, which appeared super-abundant today. Not that we were complaining at having to repeatedly look at such a stunning bird! As we sat down to have our picnic lunch we noticed a **Kagu** suddenly appear out of nowhere from right next to us. Further great views were had.

Calling in at the lake area on our return to the car we found **Swamp Harrier**, **Whistling Kite**, and **Little Pied Cormorant**.

Satisfied with our haul for the day, and with the temperatures rising and the activity dwindling, we headed back to our comfortable hotel for a couple of hours' relaxation before yet another wonderful dinner.

Day 4, 13th December 2018. Mount Koghi to Farino

We had a great morning birding at Mount Koghi once again, and we found several new birds with relative ease, including a few big targets. A bit of activity caught our eye on the entrance road, and suddenly we were face-to-face with the gorgeous and tiny endemic, **Red-throated Parrotfinch**, which was great to see so well, along with several other species such as **South Melanesian Cuckooshrike** and **Fan-tailed Gerygone**. Nearby we also had our first proper looks at **Metallic Pigeon**. As we entered the forest we found another **Red-throated Parrotfinch**, and, even better, our first **Horned Parakeet**, a rather odd-looking endemic parrot, which was busy feeding. It did, however, show fairly well and even vocalized occasionally. We walked around in the forest for a couple of hours and found lots to keep us occupied, such as **White-bellied Goshawk** (the nesting pair from a few days earlier seen again), **Goliath Imperial Pigeon**, **New Caledonian Whistler**, **Yellow-bellied Flyrobin**, **Striated Starling**, and **Barred Honeyeater**, along with plenty more! Just as we were ready to leave a bit of activity drew our attention first to a male **Long-tailed Triller** and second to a feeding **New Caledonian Parakeet**, which showed well as it fed and in doing so gave us our best looks so far after a couple of very brief views earlier in the tour.



*We saw a few endemic **Red-throated Parrotfinches** during the morning.*

By now it was midmorning and time to start our drive north to Farino for the final two nights of the tour. During the journey we noted **Eastern Osprey**, **Swamp Harrier**, and **Whistling Kite**, and a stop at some pools that had turned up some good birds on our previous tours again delivered a cracker in the form of **White-browed Crane**, a New Caledonian rarity no less! Lots of other new trip birds were found and included **Grey Teal**, **Pacific Black Duck**, **Australasian Grebe**, **Little Black Cormorant**, **Australasian Swamphen**, **Zebra Dove**, **Chestnut-breasted Mannikin**, **Silvereeye**, and **Welcome Swallow**. A rather satisfactory haul, especially the crane!

After checking into our accommodation we headed for a final walk of the day along a river. Here we saw several **New Caledonian Crows** foraging with and without tools, always fun to watch and listen to. We were tantalizingly close to seeing **Cloven-feathered Dove** as one flew off while several others could be heard calling from places we just couldn't see despite our best efforts. Several other birds were noted, such as a juvenile **White-breasted Goshawk**, **South Melanesian Cuckooshrike**, **White-breasted Woodswallow**, **Striated Starling**, and a plethora of very vocal (as usual) **New Caledonian Friarbirds**.



The bright eye of the South Melanesian Cuckooshrike really does stand out on this dark bird.

Day 5, 14th December 2018. The Farino area

Our final full day's birding of the tour was incredibly successful and very exciting too! **Buff-banded Rails** were active in the hotel gardens as we left our rooms. First we took a pre-breakfast drive toward the place where we had heard the calling **Cloven-feathered Doves** the previous night. However, along the way our journey was interrupted when we spotted one sitting in a roadside tree! It was (only) a juvenile, so not the prettiest of things, but nevertheless it was a **Cloven-feathered Dove**!

After finding this main target of the day so early we decided to switch plans and try and improve on our views of the regional endemic **Long-tailed Triller** that had been seen briefly on the previous day. This proved an excellent decision. We continued driving along the road, looking for trillers, and in doing so actually found another, much more stunning, adult **Cloven-feathered**

Dove! We had some fantastic views of it, and a short while later we managed to find the **Long-tailed Triller** we were searching for and got good views of that too. Not bad before breakfast!



*An adult **Cloven-feathered Dove** takes some beating; this is one spectacular pigeon!*

We were starting to run out of birds to look for... There was one bird still remaining, though, the toughest of all of the country's endemics, the Thicketbird, a mega-skulker and known from only a very few locations in the last 10 years, one of those mythical birds. But who doesn't love a challenge?

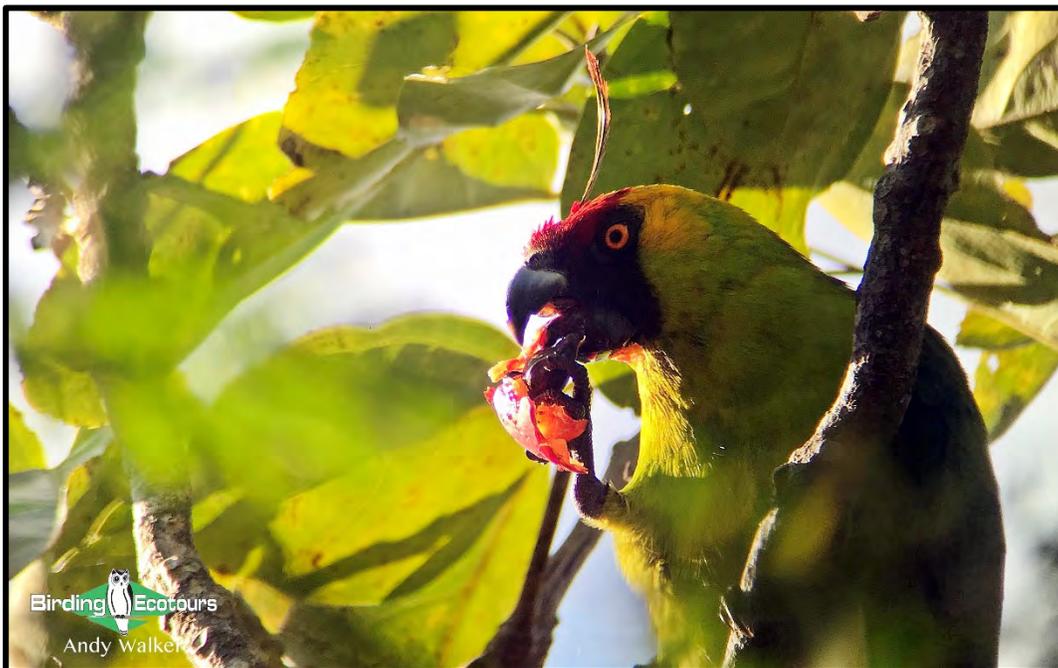
After breakfast we drove into the mountains for an hour or so above our accommodation. Along the way we saw a **Spotless Crake** and several **Buff-banded Rails** in damp areas. Then we found some suitably dense-looking thickets of grassy vegetation and started to hike through them. We had an old recording of the Thicketbird's song and played it when we arrived at a level section of the track in some shade (it was almost noon and over 30°C by this time). Incredibly as soon as the first note rang out from the speaker there was an identical call! Did this have something to do with the recording? Surely it couldn't be the bird... We played it again, and again the same call came immediately back at us. It was suddenly clear that we were on to something here. By placing the speaker directly ahead of us we gave another burst of song, and suddenly there it was... Unbelievable! A **New Caledonian Thicketbird** right before our very eyes! We had found the most unlikely and difficult of birds in the country, and in doing so we had seen all of the island's endemic species over the past few days. During the next 15 minutes we saw it a couple of times in flight, but it was amazing how it could move through the vegetation without giving its location away.

Very happy with our day we decided to head back to our accommodation, where we spent the rest of the afternoon relaxing. Over the course of the day we also had seen plenty of other endemic birds, such as numerous **New Caledonian Friarbirds**, plenty of **New Caledonian Crows**, **Red-throated Parrotfinches**, **New Caledonian Whistlers**, as well as lots more, such as **Melanesian**

Flycatcher, our best views yet of **Pacific Emerald Dove** (two sat together), and **Metallic Pigeon**, but really the day will be long remembered for the stunning adult **Cloven-feathered Dove** and the **New Caledonian Thicketbird**.

Day 6, 15th December 2018. Farino to Nouméa, tour concludes

We had an incredibly productive pre-breakfast one-hour walk near our accommodation before we had to head to the airport. A short trail along a river was very busy with birds. We finally saw **Shining Bronze Cuckoo** after hearing it every day of the tour, and straight after we'd left the cuckoo behind us we were watching a very close feeding **Horned Parakeet** that was totally unconcerned by our presence. Here too we saw **New Caledonian Crow**, **Melanesian Flycatcher**, **Yellow-bellied Flyrobin**, **Green-backed White-eye**, and **New Caledonian Myzomela**.



This rather bizarre-looking Horned Parakeet (check out that strange crest!) was more interested in feeding than in us, and so we had some great views.

A little further along the trail we spotted **Red-throated Parrotfinch**, **Striated Starling**, **Goliath Imperial Pigeon**, **New Caledonian Friarbird**, and **Barred Honeyeater** – we were collecting endemics for fun here! There were several **Cloven-feathered Doves** calling along the trail, and after a while we had views of a young bird and a short while later of a really stunning adult that showed remarkably well for ages. We actually had to leave it sitting there, as it was time for us to head back to our accommodation. What a great way to end the tour, though!

After breakfast we drove back to Nouméa, where the tour concluded in the midmorning with international flights home. We reflected on what had been an incredible trip with **Kagu** (bird of the trip, as always), **New Caledonian Thicketbird**, **Crow Honeyeater**, **New Caledonian Crow**, **Horned Parakeet**, **Cloven-feathered Dove**, **New Caledonian Parakeet**, and **White-browed Crane** topping the long list of highlights.

Bird List - Following IOC (8.2)

Birds 'heard only' are marked with (H) after the common name, all other species were seen. The following notation after the common names is used to show conservation status following BirdLife International: CR = Critically Endangered, EN = Endangered, VU = Vulnerable, NT = Near Threatened. New Caledonian endemic birds are bolded.

Common Name	Scientific Name
Ducks, Geese, Swans (Anatidae)	
Pacific Black Duck	<i>Anas superciliosa</i>
Grey Teal	<i>Anas gracilis</i>
Pheasants and Allies (Phasianidae)	
Wild Turkey	<i>Meleagris gallopavo</i>
Common Pheasant (H)	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>
Grebes (Podicipedidae)	
Australasian Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus novaehollandiae</i>
Hérons, Bitterns (Ardeidae)	
White-faced Heron	<i>Egretta novaehollandiae</i>
Cormorants, Shags (Phalacrocoracidae)	
Little Pied Cormorant	<i>Microcarbo melanoleucos</i>
Little Black Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax sulcirostris</i>
Ospreys (Pandionidae)	
Eastern Osprey	<i>Pandion cristatus</i>
Kites, Hawks, Eagles (Accipitridae)	
White-bellied Goshawk - NT	<i>Accipiter haplochrous</i>
Swamp Harrier	<i>Circus approximans</i>
Whistling Kite	<i>Haliastur sphenurus</i>
Kagu (Rhynochetidae)	
Kagu - EN	<i>Rhynochetos jubatus</i>
Rails, Crakes and Coots (Rallidae)	
Buff-banded Rail	<i>Gallirallus philippensis</i>

Common Name	Scientific Name
Spotless Crake	<i>Porzana tabuensis</i>
White-browed Crake	<i>Porzana cinerea</i>
Australasian Swamphen	<i>Porphyrio melanotus</i>
Gulls, Terns and Skimmers (Laridae)	
Silver Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus novaehollandiae</i>
Greater Crested Tern	<i>Thalasseus bergii</i>
Pigeons, Doves (Columbidae)	
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>
Metallic Pigeon	<i>Columba vitiensis</i>
Spotted Dove	<i>Spilopelia chinensis</i>
Pacific Emerald Dove	<i>Chalcophaps longirostris</i>
Zebra Dove	<i>Geopelia striata</i>
Cloven-feathered Dove - NT	<i>Drepanoptila holosericea</i>
Goliath Imperial Pigeon - NT	<i>Ducula goliath</i>
Cuckoos (Cuculidae)	
Shining Bronze Cuckoo	<i>Chrysococcyx lucidus</i>
Fan-tailed Cuckoo	<i>Cacomantis flabelliformis</i>
Swifts (Apodidae)	
Satin Swiftlet	<i>Collocalia uropygialis</i>
White-rumped Swiftlet	<i>Aerodramus spodiopygius</i>
Kingfishers (Alcedinidae)	
Sacred Kingfisher	<i>Todiramphus sanctus</i>
Old World Parrots (Psittaculidae)	
Horned Parakeet - VU	<i>Eunymphicus cornutus</i>
New Caledonian Parakeet	<i>Cyanoramphus saisseti</i>
Coconut Lorikeet	<i>Trichoglossus haematodus</i>
Honeyeaters (Meliphagidae)	
New Caledonian Myzomela	<i>Myzomela caledonica</i>
Grey-eared Honeyeater	<i>Lichmera incana</i>
New Caledonian Friarbird	<i>Philemon diemenensis</i>

Common Name	Scientific Name
Crow Honeyeater - CR	<i>Gymnomyza aubryana</i>
Barred Honeyeater	<i>Glycifohia undulata</i>
Australasian Warblers (Acanthizidae)	
Fan-tailed Gerygone	<i>Gerygone flavolateralis</i>
Woodswallows, Butcherbirds and Allies (Artamidae)	
White-breasted Woodswallow	<i>Artamus leucorhynchus</i>
Cuckooshrikes (Campephagidae)	
South Melanesian Cuckooshrike	<i>Coracina caledonica</i>
New Caledonian Cuckooshrike - NT	<i>Edolisoma anale</i>
Long-tailed Triller	<i>Lalage leucopyga</i>
Whistlers and allies (Pachycephalidae)	
New Caledonian Whistler	<i>Pachycephala caledonica</i>
Rufous Whistler	<i>Pachycephala rufiventris</i>
Fantails (Rhipiduridae)	
Grey Fantail	<i>Rhipidura albiscapa</i>
Streaked Fantail	<i>Rhipidura verreauxi</i>
Monarchs (Monarchidae)	
Southern Shrikebill	<i>Clytorhynchus pachycephaloides</i>
Melanesian Flycatcher	<i>Myiagra caledonica</i>
Crows, Jays (Corvidae)	
New Caledonian Crow	<i>Corvus moneduloides</i>
Australasian Robins (Petroicidae)	
Yellow-bellied Flyrobin	<i>Microeca flaviventris</i>
Bulbuls (Pycnonotidae)	
Red-vented Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus cafer</i>
Swallows, Martins (Hirundinidae)	

Common Name	Scientific Name
Welcome Swallow	<i>Hirundo neoxena</i>
Grassbirds and Allies (Locustellidae)	
New Caledonian Thicketbird	<i>Cincloramphus mariae</i>
White-eyes (Zosteropidae)	
Green-backed White-eye	<i>Zosterops xanthochroa</i>
Silvereye	<i>Zosterops lateralis</i>
Starlings, Rhabdornis (Sturnidae)	
Striated Starling	<i>Aplonis striata</i>
Common Myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>
Old World Sparrows, Snowfinches (Passeridae)	
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Waxbills, Munias and Allies (Estrildidae)	
Common Waxbill	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>
Red-throated Parrotfinch	<i>Erythrura psittacea</i>
Chestnut-breasted Mannikin	<i>Lonchura castaneothorax</i>
Total seen	62
Total heard only	1
Total recorded	63

Reptile List

Common Name	Scientific Name
Geckos (Gekkonidae)	
Common House Gecko	<i>Hemidactylus frenatus</i>
Skinks (Scincidae)	
Litter Skink sp.	<i>Caledoniscincus</i> sp.
Southern Whiptailed Skink	<i>Tropidoscincus variabilis</i>
Total Seen	3