

Cocos- Keeling and Christmas Island Tour, February, 2016.

Although Cocos and Christmas Islands are closer to Indonesia than Australia, they are both Australian Territories.



In February this year, I joined a birding tour to Cocos-Keeling and Christmas Islands with the hope that I could add some new species to my Australian bird list. In Perth our group received the news that our flight to Cocos was delayed because the tropical cyclone near Cocos made it too dangerous for landing. Fortunately, we were only delayed for 24 hours, and we were off the next day, hoping that the cyclone may have brought in some new vagrants.

Map: Location of Cocos-Keeling and Christmas Island

Our first sighting of Cocos was breathtaking: the white beaches, palm trees and aqua blue water of the inner lagoon were idyllic.

The Cocos Keeling Islands are actually two large coral atolls, with most of the population of about 600 living on Home Island (mainly Cocos Malay people) and fewer living on West Island (mostly European and mainland people). During our stay, most of our time was spent on West Island, as this is where the airport and the accommodation are situated.

Our tour guide, Richard Baxter, kept us on the go. A number of times we caught the ferry from West Island to Home Island (a half hour trip), where we checked out the Clunies-Ross mansion and grounds, and its surrounds. On one of the trips we trekked to the end of North Island then waded knee-deep to some of the nearby small islands. It was very interesting and we had great expectations but unfortunately we didn't find any birds of interest. We then turned our attention back to the West Island. At the local farm we flushed out several Pin-tailed Snipe; at the inner lagoon the Nankeen Night Heron and the Western Reef Egret made an appearance; a fair amount of time was spent at the wetlands (Wilson's Lagoon) where we had good views of the Common (Eurasian) Teal, but little else; an Oriental Pratincole and Pacific Golden Plover were picked up near the runway; at the end of the runway we flushed a Watercock out of the long grass; and on the far side of the runway near the golf course, a Common Bittern was flushed from its ground cover.



The highlight of the week was the sighting of an adult male Narcissus Flycatcher (a vagrant from Asia), first recorded by workers at Barrow Island off N-W W.A. in 1995, and not seen elsewhere in Australia.

This beautiful bird was quite happy to pose for us, but only after playing hide and seek for a few days, making us spend many hours being eaten alive by huge mosquitos while patiently waiting for his appearance.

Narcissus Flycatcher Male, Photo: Pam Kenway

After a wonderful week, we then boarded the plane for the 1 ½ hour flight to Christmas Island.

i am only after them to provide examples of how birds should be held when being examined



Christmas Island Frigatebird, Female, Photo:Pam Kenway

On landing I looked out the window of the plane and I couldn't believe my eyes: there were more birds soaring in the sky than I'd seen all week on Cocos. Over the next week I soon found that they were mainly Frigatebirds, Boobies and Tropicbirds and were seen in many locations all over the island.

The first afternoon was spent familiarising ourselves with the area by a group walk around the settlement near our accommodation. Here we came across Island Thrush, Christmas Island Imperial Pigeon, Christmas Island White-eye, Glossy Swiftlet, Tree Sparrow, and Java Sparrow.

Our first 'job' the next morning was the release of a Red-legged Crake that had been rescued from one of the ships and left in the care of one of the locals. Once the box was opened, the bird gingerly stepped out, then swiftly disappeared into the undergrowth, never to be seen again.

Over the week we covered nearly the entire island, two thirds of which is National Park. Although it was not the season for the Red Crab migration, there were a few forest roads that needed to be cleared by volunteers before we could safely drive down them.

One of the highlights for me was a trip by boat exploring the island's coastline. White fluffy Brown Booby chicks could be seen in nests on the limestone cliffs, which were deeply undercut by the waves. Those who chose to snorkel, also experienced the beautiful coloured fish, and corals of the reef. At one site we swam with giant Trevally and the occasional Reef Shark, and another stop had us snorkelling above a pod of Spinner Dolphins. After all this excitement, we headed back to the jetty. On the way, Hama, the skipper, cast out a bright red lure (without hooks), and it was a real joy to watch the young juvenile frigatebirds and Brown Boobies, playing and squabbling to see who could catch the elusive lure.

A special point of interest was a visit to the national park 'station'. We were there in time to watch a young Abbott's Booby being fed, though the ranger had to eventually take it into a wire enclosure, so that its food wasn't snatched by the hangers-on (Red-footed Boobies and frigatebirds) that were after a free feed. The Abbott's Booby is the rarest booby in the world and listed as endangered. It nests only on Christmas Island.



A National Parks Ranger with a young Abbotts Booby in care, Photo: Pam Kenway



No matter where we went on the island, there was the constant presence of the resident seabirds either soaring above the plateau, patrolling the sea cliffs, collecting nesting material or perched in trees and on cliffs. The island is certainly one of the best places in the world to see these species and most are abundant.

Red-tailed Tropicbird, Photo: Pam Kenway

Though Christmas Island undoubtedly had more birds than Cocos Keeling Islands, Cocos had a much more friendly and relaxed island atmosphere.

Together these two islands made for a wonderful time birding.

Written by Pam Kenway