

**DESTINATION NEW CALEDONIA -  
UPDATE INFORMATION FOR VISITING BIRDERS (July 2006)**

by Petri Hottola

Finnish University Network for Tourism Studies

petri.hottola(and)joensuu.fi

The following text has been designed to provide update information for birders visiting New Caledonia by themselves, without local or tour guides and packaged services. The information is based on a one week visit in July 2006 (from 19<sup>th</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup>). A total of 67 species of birds, out of which only the most interesting ones will be mentioned here, were recorded during the 5,5 days of birdwatching. 1,5 days were lost due to practical problems, some of which may perhaps be avoided by reading this report.

Mid-winter proved to be a fine time to visit New Caledonia. The weather was predominantly sunny, with relatively calm days and an odd afternoon shower. Only on two days, there were 3-4 hours of rain in the middle of the day. It was cool but not cold on Grande Terre, the main island, with temperatures varying between +8 - +22 C. All in all, conditions were quite favorable for birdwatching and other outdoors activities.

A broken bridge, Pont Pérignon, at the Parque Provincial de Riviere Bleue, the island's paramount birding site, has recently made seeing the New Caledonia specialities a potentially frustrating matter. The damage occurred in 2003 and the bridge has not been repaired yet. A lucrative guiding business has born for those who can afford the high cost, leaving the rest in a complicated situation. There is, however, no need to despair. The 'Kagu Zone' at the Blue River Provincial Park can be reached with relative ease, after certain arrangements.



Photo 1. The bridge of Pont Pérignon.

Actually, the broken bridge has been a blessing in disguise. The core area of the national park has been able to recover, as the noisy, littering hordes of weekend visitors have not been able to enter it anymore. According to islanders, both the diversity and numbers of wildlife have therefore increased. Special interest tourists have also benefited, being able to visit the kauri forests either with the guides and 4WD vehicles, or by doing it independently. At the moment, the best birdwatching areas are pretty much reserved for birds and visiting birders, which is a wonderful thing. Let's hope the bridge stays as it is!

Some patience is needed when one approaches New Caledonian services from the non-French Europe. Many practical matters may prove to be difficult to arrange, as a consequence of intercultural problems (language, differences in communication culture etc.). Personally, I mailed dozens of email messages without any reply, and had to work hard to obtain certain crucial pieces of information. As an example, finding out the current condition of Pont Pérignon took me two months. In the end, I wrote the title of my simple request in French and caught the attention of some officer at the provincial park ([parcrivierebleue@province-sud.nc](mailto:parcrivierebleue@province-sud.nc)), receiving a short reply: Yes, the bridge is still broken and you need to walk across it. This was, after all, an essential piece of information in regard to car and bicycle rental.

All the work for arranging things beforehand was worth the effort, New Caledonia being an expensive destination. You do not want to spend time on the island for arranging things, or waiting for others to arrange them. Personally, I wasted my arrival afternoon due to problems with accommodation, car rental (broken door lock which was repaired in three hours) and bike rental (cf. below). Therefore, no time to visit Mt. Koghis, a well known birding destination close to Noumea. Later on, another day was spent at Magenta airport, when Air Caledonie failed to do its job. Therefore, no New Caledonian Fruit-eating Bat (Roussette), which is said to be common in Lifou and in the northern part of Grande Terre. Even when things are arranged, something may go wrong.

Nevertheless, the birds are just wonderful here and more than compensate the trouble. Moreover, New Caledonia is a beautiful island with great people. I recommend contacting Nouvelle Calédonie Tourisme Point Sud (NCTPS) at [www.visitnouvellecaledonie.com](http://www.visitnouvellecaledonie.com) for general information and printed materials. On request, they will mail you a useful road map, addresses and detailed maps of the Blue River Provincial Park and the Grand Kaori nature trail. Other options for information are the NCTPS offices in Paris ([info-par@nctps.com](mailto:info-par@nctps.com)), Sydney ([info-syd@nctps.com](mailto:info-syd@nctps.com)), Auckland ([info-akl@nctps.com](mailto:info-akl@nctps.com)) and Tokyo ([info-tyo@nctps.com](mailto:info-tyo@nctps.com)).

There is a map of Noumea at [www.newcaledonia.jp/images/map/carte-noumea.pdf](http://www.newcaledonia.jp/images/map/carte-noumea.pdf)

## ACCOMMODATION

There are not too many economical and otherwise attractive choices available in Noumea, a motel or a self-catering cottage being the favorite of many traveling birdwatchers. Additionally, these places tend to get fully booked even on the low season. Personally, I preferred to stay at Motel Anse Vata ([www.wamland.com/motelansevata/menufrançais.htm](http://www.wamland.com/motelansevata/menufrançais.htm)), which was a good choice from several practical points of view. Importantly, the manager, Mr. Bernard Bigaud, and his friends are kind and helpful people, providing information in good English and making enquiries for you. The resourceful manager ([bernbigaud@offratel.nc](mailto:bernbigaud@offratel.nc)) will also reply your emails promptly, unlike some other establishments.

At the Motel Anse Vata, the basic room charge for 1-2 persons in a self-catering double with a small kitchen was XPF6.600 per day. A one week stay cut the daily rate down to XPF5.800 in July 2006. Parking is on the street but safe enough, and there always was space for the car. If requested, they will arrange transportation to Magenta (XPF1500) and Tontouta (XPF3000), even at very early hours (for the 6.00 Lifou departure, you need to wake up at 4.30).

In Farino, the little accommodation available tends to get fully booked. Therefore, do the reservation early enough. I got a fast (negative) reply from Refuge de Farino (Sabine Hennebelle, [refuge.farino@lagoon.nc](mailto:refuge.farino@lagoon.nc), [www.refugedefarino.com/](http://www.refugedefarino.com/)), the best option available. There is alternative accommodation in nearby towns, but booking a room may be a challenge if you do not speak French. In case you want to stay a night in Lifou, as I also planned to do, Hotel Servigny is a good choice close to the airport and forest habitats ([www.hotel-servigny.nc/](http://www.hotel-servigny.nc/)). They provide a variety of meals and free airport transit. Its studios are also more affordable than, for example, the rooms of Drehu Village.

## CAR RENTAL

Tried Avis first but their Internet service failed, confirming a ridiculously low rate (€20 per week) not to be trusted. In two months, Avis Finland and Avis Europe headquarters did not succeed in correcting this, apparently because there was no response from Avis New Caledonia. Eventually, I canceled my reservation and contacted Europcar instead, possibly paying more, but could also discuss details by email with their Noumea representative, Mencar (on the Anse Vata road, after hours return possible, large supermarket and petrol station across the street, [europcar@mencar.nc](mailto:europcar@mencar.nc)). After initial problems (broken door lock), no hassles with this company. The car was not 100% clean and the petrol tank was less than full, but this also meant that I did not have to mind these matter too much myself.

Petrol costs about the same as in Europe and the cost is not really a problem because of the short distances. Traffic may be demanding at times; I saw four serious accidents on the Noumea toll road, with several dead. Especially on weekends, traffic deaths are regular on highways around the capital. Interestingly, there are hardly any Asian made cars in New Caledonia; French and German brands dominate. Finding your way is in general easy, with the exception of Noumea, which is fortunately a relatively small town. All the main car rental agencies had their key-boxes at Magenta airport, as well. It is therefore possible to return your car at the domestic airport, which may save time and money in certain situations.

## BIKE RENTAL

In order to reach the 'Kagu Zone' at Blue River Provincial Park, one needs to have a bicycle. Additionally, one needs to rent a car which can accommodate it. Walking the 10-20 km is not really a good option with the limited time, unless you are used to run long distance. There are quite a few birds species to see and walking means less morning and late afternoon hours in the core area. In the case of torrential afternoon rain, having a bike helps a lot, as well.

My first choice for bike rental, Plages Loisirs, was located conveniently close to Motel Anse Vata by the beach of Anse Vata. Unfortunately and surprisingly, they declined my attempt to rent a bike. "We will not rent if you intend to ride the (mountain) bike on dirt roads. The tires and the rest of the bike will become dirty, and there may be damage." I offered to clean the bike, pay twice the regular rate, and was almost ready to plead on my knees, but the boss was adamant. For a moment, I could see all my plans to collapse. Access to the Blue River Park is, after all, an absolute necessity for a visiting birder as long as there are no alternative sites for the key species.

Fortunately, one of the more sympathetic members of the Plages Loisirs staff took me upstairs, asking the young lady at tourism information to look for another option. She immediately suggested that there were bikes available in the national park itself. I did, however, already know that even though Blue River Provincial Park had mountain bike rental by Pont Pérignon, the service was only available on Sundays (the busy day in the park), for limited hours in the middle of the day.

Luckily, the woman at tourist information knew another company in the center, Bike Paradise, on the ground floor of Gare Maritime (NOT the Gare Maritime des Iles). Gare Maritime is probably the easiest to find larger building as you approach the city along the toll road from Tontouta. It stands on the right along Rue J. Ferry, the main entrance avenue. She called the manager (who spoke perfect English) and we agreed to meet in the evening, well after closing time. Bike Paradise proved to be an excellent choice ([dimparadise@canl.nc](mailto:dimparadise@canl.nc); tel/fax 288815, mobile 784025; 12 bis rue Emile Trianon, 98800 Noumea).

The manager, a veteran of international tourism business on all continents, knew the park very well and could tell about the road conditions there. He charged the usual rate, XPF1990 per day (including taxes), and provided a sturdy bike which successfully carried me to the Kagu and other great birds on the following two days. A lock and repair kit were included. I paid a reasonable deposit (Visa transaction) and we tore the bill afterwards. What a perfect service after the disappointing Plages Loisirs!

Importantly, he was flexible with the return of the bike, agreeing to meet me at 18.00, one hour after the Blue River park's closing time, and thereby allowed me to stay two full days in the park. Having rented a Peugeot 206SW, with the extra trunk space, I simply lifted the bike into the car and everything went well. (At night, took the bike into my motel room). It is possible to park right along the Rue J. Ferry, in front of

the building, to pick up or return a bike, even though parking is not otherwise permitted there. For long term parking, there is plenty of space on both sides of the building, off street. In case you are a couple with two bikes, you need a 4WD with more space. Otherwise, you do not need a 4WD in the Blue River park.

## **BLUE RIVER NATIONAL PARK**

Finding one's way to the park was not easy on the first time. Leaving Noumea before dawn, one has to drive far enough towards Tontouta before turning right at the large intersection. The entrance to Mt. Koghis is also along this road. In the beginning, there are no signs to Yaté but to Mont-Dore, Robinson and other close-by settlements. The traffic is heavy between 6.00 - 8.00 and once again by 17.00 in the afternoon. Fortunately, it is people commuting to Noumea and back to the suburbs, and you will be driving on a relatively free lane to the opposite direction. There are, however, plenty of traffic lights, roundabouts and low speed limits most of the way. Later on, there are also sections of the road in need of repair. Therefore, the 40+ km to the park takes at least an hour.

As mentioned in several trip reports, the park is open from 7.00 to 17.00 on weekdays and weekends, except on Mondays. Unfortunately, the staff at the entrance gate have a tendency to arrive half an hour late. The current entrance fee is XPF400 per person, a bit lower than it used to be, a fair reduction due to the broken bridge and consequently limited use of the park. There is a large water reservoir, plenty of dry bush and the kaori forest, which has mostly been logged during the latter half of 19<sup>th</sup> century. The forest is, however, regenerating well, and harbors a great wealth of plants and wildlife. The best old growth forest exists on the upper slopes, and can only be reached with difficulty (and special permits).

All the target bird species can be seen between km5 and Pont Germain, and around the entrance gate and information center. There is no specific need to hire guides if you are reasonably experienced in birdwatching. Finding the way to the sites is straightforward once you have the bike. There are always park rangers around and an emergency phone at km4. There are picnic shelters by the road. At Pont Germain, there is a tap for drinking water (river water is fine, as well) and a wide opening which allows the best views over canopy, ideal for spotting parrots, doves and hawks. Otherwise, the forested part of the track is relatively closed, with few small openings.

## **CYCLING IN THE PARK**

Proved to be easier than expected, despite initial problems with a bicycle one or two sizes too small for me. I am 1,86 and 140 kg, another "fat birder", and would need a larger than average mountain bike. Nevertheless, I cycled more than 50 km during the two 10 hour visits. Officially, the park opens at 7 (except on Mondays), and may actually be open by 7.30. Driving to Pont Pérignon by car takes about 15 minutes. By 17.00, one has to be back at the park entrance.

The 'broken' bridge was in a great condition and would be crossed by lorries if it was in Pantanal (I had planned to swim across with the bike, if necessary : ), to see the Kagu!). I parked the Peugeot by Pont Pérignon, crossed the closed bridge, and cycled along the undulating road towards Grand Kaori and Pont Germain. The road was flat and hard, without potholes and stones, and did not get too slippery in rain (hours of torrential rain would probably create problems). It is 5 km to the forest, and the first Kagus can be seen at km 5,5, by a sign 'Lieu Dit de Cagou' (Territory of Kagus). From km 5, there are 3+ kilometers to Grand Kaori trail and further 2,4 km to Pont Germain, the total distance from the bridge being around 11 km. The road gets flatter after km5, when the really interesting birding starts, and follows the Blue River before crossing it at Pont Germain.

Reaching the forest took me 40 minutes, with the too small bike, meaning that I was there around 8.30, about 2 hours after sunrise. With a right size bike this would be a less than 30 minute piece of cake. Bird activity was particularly high before 10, and once again in the late afternoon, but all the species could be seen at any time of the day. A Fieldguides group visited the park on the same days, together with Yves Letocart (nothing but retired!), whose liberal use of tapes guaranteed them most of the species even during the mid-day hours. They arrived between 10.00 and 11.00, losing the best morning hours, and left early, partly due to the long and gated 4WD detour.

The following list provides some experiences on key bird species:



**Whitebellied Goshawk:** Best chance at Pont Germain (PG) opening but could be seen anywhere along the forested part of the road. Saw one at PG and heard another closer to Grand Kaori (GK).

**Kagu:** By Lieu de Cagou (LC) sign, between there and GK, at the GK parking lot and the beginning of the GK trail. Listen for the hissing alarm call. A shy but nowadays easy to see, impressive species.



Photo 2. Kagu territory, rental bike and a poison bait by the rock.

**Metallic Pigeon:** Saw my birds flying above the forest at PG and at km 4,5, just before entering the forest. Apparently does not call often.

**Cloven-feathered Dove:** Fruiting trees by the road, between LC and GK. Unobtrusive; listen for its call and the whirring sound of wings. Saw only one pair here.

**New Caledonian Imperial-Pigeon:** Many calling and a few perched by the road. Shy and therefore not easy to see. Eventually, you will get close views of this huge pigeon, early mornings being the best time.

**New Caledonian Parakeet:** Best seen by the entrance ticket booth, any time of the day. Also seen at PG.

**Horned Parakeet:** Best seen by the entrance ticket booth, any time of the day. Also seen at PG.

**New Caledonian Friarbird:** Common, noisy and conspicuous in the forest.

**New Caledonian Myzomela:** Several birds with mixed flocks in the forest.

**Crow Honeyeater:** One calling on the slope above Lieu de Cagous, one along the GK trail (stream crossing), one at the GK parking lot (attracted by Letocart's tape) and another on the left further on. Not as difficult as one would have expected.

**Barred Honeyeater:** Best views by the entrance ticket booth.

**Fantailed Gerygone:** Relatively common in mixed flocks by the road and river.

**Yellowbellied Robin:** Tame and conspicuous between km5 and PG, especially before noon.

**New Caledonian Whistler:** Common in the forest. Also seen by the entrance gate.

**Streaked Fantail:** Common in the forest and easily seen by the road.

**New Caledonian Flycatcher:** Three males seen along the road, by picnic shelters (e.g. Gué de la Pourina) and other small clearings. Did not have to look for these beauties.

**Southern Shrikebill:** Not the easiest species to see. Saw one very well by the GK entrance. Several territories between 1 km before GK and 1,5 km after, towards PG. Singing males most active on late afternoons, after 15.00, and easily attracted to a whistled imitation of their simple song.

**New Caledonian Crow:** On the first morning, 2 individuals calling 500 m before the GK entrance.



Photo 3. Pont Germain.

**Longtailed Triller:** Three by the access road, after the entrance, and along the first 4 km after PP.

**Melanesian Cuckoo-Shrike:** Only one seen along the forested part of the road, in a fruiting tree.

**New Caledonian Cuckoo-Shrike:** Mostly seen at GK (along the trail, by the river) and along the road from GK to PG, both down in the forest (fruiting small trees) and perched on upper branches.

**Greenbacked White-eye:** Few dozen along the forested part of the road. (Silvereyes in the more open bushland along the access road).

**Red-throated Parrotfinch:** One and two seen on two occasions by a bushy opening next to the entrance fee booth, on the left, close to the information centre.

## FARINO

Can be reached by driving 100 km north from Noumea to Tontouta, Boulouparis and La Foa. Made two morning visits there, afternoons being spent on searching for seabird observation points. Starting at 5.00 in Noumea, arrived at the Farino Grassbird site by 7.30. The road is in excellent condition, especially after Tontouta. The main cause of delays on the way was the Noumea - Tontouta toll road, with its heavy traffic and road works about to be completed soon (new four lane sections). Beware of crossing Swampen!

One km after La Foa, turn right to Sarraméa and Farino, and take the first junction (1 km or so) left to Farino. Follow this road, continuing straight through the second junction and climb uphill to another junction on a steep ridge, turn left and then (less than 100 m) to the right. As you descent to a valley, a small bridge on the left leads to a gravel road you are looking for (I did not notice the small chapel mentioned in some other reports). Cross the bridge and immediately turn right, following the stream through a mosaic of woodland, scattered pastures, houses and gardens.

Relying on misleading information, wasted my first morning along the lower part of the gravel road, by the first gate (km1) with a cattle grid, which is not really the optimal habitat for observing the **New Caledonia Grassbird**. The place to go is located on top of the hill, almost 5 km above the cattle grid gate, where the dirt road ends by a grassy opening (park your car here). Down on the left you see a smaller track, the Grassbird Track. The first 300-400 meters are fine with plenty of lantana thicket. Afterwards, the habitat is degraded due to logging operations, and perhaps improves again further down. Deer are common here.

The road up to the Grassbird Track was in good condition; no real problems with the Peugeot. It is always possible to turn around or park along the road in case you encounter problems (after heavy rains?); you do not need to park below the cattle grid gate. There is an easy to visit supermarket at Tontouta, by the airport junction, in case you want to buy some provisions on your way back to Noumea, and avoid the search for parking place in the busy city. Food is pretty expensive in New Caledonia, oftentimes more expensive than in Europe, but cooking your own meals helps the situation. Accommodations such as Motel Anse Vata have self-catering facilities (fridge & gas stove in a small kitchen attached to the room).

Short comments on key species in Farino:

**White-bellied Goshawk:** Saw two, including a close-by perched adult by the cattle grid gate (on the left, by a small opening) at km1. Spends long periods relatively motionless, stalking its prey from a mid-storey vantage point.

**Spotless Crane:** Saw one on the gravel road, soon after the small bridge, in a spot where the road runs close to the stream with marshy edges. An unexpected record for this difficult to see species.

**Sacred Kingfisher:** Very common here; uncommon elsewhere. Supposed to be abundant, but not in the barren, degraded inland regions of the south.

**Cloven-feathered Dove:** Common, esp. around km 1,5 - 2,5. Superb scope views of a male sunbathing and calling on an open branch.

**New Caledonian Imperial-Pigeon:** Several calling, but not as easy to see as in BRPP.

**New Caledonian Myzomela:** Several along the gravel road.

**Barred Honeyeater:** Common, very nice views here.

**Fantailed Gerygone:** Common and easy to see.



**Yellowbellied Robin:** One along the Grassbird Track.

**New Caledonian Whistler:** Only one seen here.

**New Caledonian Crow:** Common uphill, with several family parties observed with ease. Being naturally curious, the crows came to inspect me at a close range. Did not see any in the more open, agricultural habitats.

**Melanesian Cuckoo-Shrike:** Two very noisy and playful ones around km 2.

**Striated Starling:** The best place for this species; excellent views of perched pairs (common). Other records along Noumea access roads, close to Mt. Koghis.

**Greenbacked White-eye:** Abundant here (hundreds); esp. along the Grassbird Track.

**New Caledonia Grassbird:** One of the worst skulkers there are, worse than the Australian Scrub-birds or the East Asian Bradypterys warblers! When silent, almost impossible to detect. Took hours to locate one without a tape; just before rain, heard a purring sound in lantana (about 200 m down the Grassbird Track), and finally knew where to look at.

**Red-throated Parrotfinch:** Three skulkers along the Grassbird track.

## LIFOU

All the main target species could still be discovered within a kilometer from the airport buildings in July 2006, with relative ease. Walk away from the airport, past the 'football field', currently a pasture for goats, ignore the first junction to the left, and continue to the main T-intersection, declining lifts from the friendly islanders. Continue few hundred meters either to the left or right, left having less traffic. The target species can be seen just about anywhere on this walk. At times, the outgoing and incoming airport traffic may be a nuisance. Groups of people also walk along the main road, but they are very polite to visiting birders.

The earlier you are here, the better. I would suggest flying in the afternoon, staying at Hotel Le Servigny, and walking around the woodlands at sunrise to get the best views and experiences. All the species can probably be seen anywhere on the island, away from open fields and plantations.

According to the locals, Air Caledonie (AC) operations are somewhat unreliable. It is therefore not advisable to book late afternoon flights (often cancelled, especially in winter). They are also very popular; you need an early booking. AC does not allow much luggage, which is therefore best left in Noumea. Personally, I waited six hours at the airport, trying in vain to get a seat on an earlier flight to Lifou (had a seat on the last flight), only to find out that AC cancelled all the remaining connections to Lifou, Uvea and Maré 1 minute after announcing that check in was finally open. The explanation was: "Sunset is approaching and we cannot operate from this airport (Magenta) after dark, as we do not have the necessary equipment". Apparently, as days are short in winter the late afternoon flights leave only if the sky is completely clear. This does not prevent AC from selling the seats, and an international traveler with a tight schedule may find himself in a difficult situation. Therefore, it is also best not to fly to Lifou on your last day before international departure from Tontouta, even though this may otherwise appear convenient.

In my case AC paid my taxi back to the motel and provided a seat for the next morning 6.00 flight, which left 45 minutes late but at least arrived safely on Lifou after 30 minutes. Dozens of domestic travelers had spent the night at the airport. I had an afternoon return flight to Magenta and could not really relax on Lifou, knowing that failing to reach Grande Terre the same day would mean losing all my non-refundable seats the next morning (Noumea-Auckland-Brisbane-Singapore-London-Helsinki). Fortunately, everything went well this time. One more shock was, however, waiting at the Tontouta airport. Arriving 110 minutes before departure, the first thing I saw at the airport was a monitor with a text "Check in, NZ256 to Auckland: Closed". There were nobody at the check in counter and no passengers around, either. For a moment I thought that I was late, some unknown security measure having caused the check in to close this early. Fortunately, it was just the local way of telling that the counter was not open yet. In ten minutes, it opened.





Photo 4. Lifou airport.



Photo 5. Airport access road with prime habitat for the endemics.

**Red-bellied Fruit-Dove:** Common in the bushy forest, with many calling and several crossing the roads early in the morning, the activity dying out by 9.30 or so. Did not find any really useful trails into the forest to look for a perched one, but was happy with the fine flight views.

**Cardinal Myzomela:** Common and easy to see. The local subspecies has a dark belly, not portrayed in the Birds of the Solomons, Vanuatu & New Caledonia.

**Streaked Fantail:** Common and easy to see.

**Polynesian Triller:** A surprise discovery in a garden close to airport; an adult male readily identified by white supercilia, matt black backside, light brown median coverts and a short, all black tail. Apparently a straggler from the nearby Vanuatu. Five **Long-tailed Trillers** were also seen.

**Striated Starling:** Few around the main airport intersection.

**Large Lifou White-eye:** Contrary to several trip reports, proved to be difficult to find. Vocal early in the morning, but did not bother to follow the song, believing that one would eventually become visible. Took two and half hours to finally see the species. Be careful with the abundant **Dark Brown Honeyeaters**, which are of same size and appearance; a LLW in secondary growth can be dismissed as a Honeyeater.

**Small Lifou White-eye:** Very common, pretty and easy to see.

**Silvereye/"Sootyheaded White-eye":** Very common. The Lifou birds, supposedly *melanopsis* Silvereyes, are strikingly colored with dark heads etc. As others have suggested, Lifou probably has three endemic Zosterops species instead of two.

## SEAWATCHING

Experimental seawatching being one of my interests, I tried to observe seabirds at four different locations in New Caledonia: the beach of Po  , the bay of Gouaro, and Ouen Toro & Anse Vata in Noumea. In winter, most of the shearwaters are away from New Caledonia and one cannot expect to see large numbers of seabirds. The resident species are, however, even more interesting, and worth some exploration.

### Ouen Toro (Noumea)

On the other side of the cape of Ouen Toro, to the east from the beach of Anse Vata, there is a convenient parking place with benches ideal for scope-assisted seawatching. Unfortunately, the waters in the lagoon are relatively shallow and the deep sea far, far away. Three short visits produced only **Swift Terns, Silver Gulls, Pacific Reef Egrets, Common Waxbills** and other all-around species. In rough weather, the variety of seabirds probably increases.

### Anse Vata (Noumea)

The peaceful main beach of Anse Vata was surprisingly productive during the one three-hour visit I made on the last evening in Noumea: great sunset and **Nankeen Night-Heron, Osprey, Peregrine**, and many others, the best record being a party of four **Lesser Frigatebirds** crossing the bay on their way to northeast (and the above-mentioned parking lot). Earlier, I had just glanced the lagoon, noticing the common coastal birds. There are benches here as well, and nobody will bother your birding despite the plenitude of tourism businesses around.



Photo 6. The beach of Anse Vata, Noumea.

### **Plage de Poé (Bourail)**

At the beach of Poé (Plage de Poé), west of Bourail and one+ hour from Farino, reaching the sea was easy enough but views rather inadequate due to the long distance to deep waters, and the very low shoreline. Few far away Tahiti Petrels could, however, be identified from the beach with the help of a telescope, with difficulty. Not worth the effort unless combined with swimming in the lagoon and other beach activities. Babes in bikinis may also become a 'nuisance', distracting one's attention from the birds.

### **"Cape Sea Krait" (Bourail)**

On the southern side of Baie de Gouaro, I turned left from the Bourail highway, towards Nessadiou (narrow bridge & merging road in the beginning). After two km or so, a narrow tarmac road (the only one) turns 90 degrees to the left and continues 500 m south along a residential area (row of houses on the left), becoming an even more narrow dirt road by another narrow bridge. The road did, however, improve and widen further on, going through hilly pastures along a large mangrove estuary. On the ponds on the right, there were 16 **Grey Teal** among other wetland species. Continuing straight on, one arrives at the end of the road, after a somewhat muddy section, close to the mangroves. From here, there are good views to the Bay of Gouaro, with **Swift Terns**, **Pacific Reef Egrets** and others resting on low tide sandbars.





Photo 7. End of the gravel road.

From the beach, one can also see the high cliffs of a nearby cape at the mouth of the bay, on the left. In here, the reef is broken and deep waters (and seabirds) come closer to the shore. At low tide, it is easy to walk to the cape along a wide basalt shelf at the bottom of the progressively higher cliffs (do remember to return before high tide!). After few hundred meters there is an indistinct but well-used trail up to the left, through vegetation. Finishing this short climb, look right and you will see an overgrown clearing continuing to the top of the cliff. This is private land with private holiday villas close by; an uneasy place to visit even though there are no 'no trespassing' signs. One of the landowners I met was, however, most welcoming.

On top of the cliff, there was a small pepper garden and at least two openings in-between bushes, from where it was possible to observe the sea, with dozens of **Tahiti Petrels** flying south along the coast. With a scope, one is able to get good looks of these sturdy petrels and perhaps something else. The opening between bushes were mostly created by grazing cattle, which was, however, somewhere else at the time of the visit.

Why do I call the place "Cape Sea Krait"? Being in a hurry to reach the high cliff, I did not pay much attention to my surroundings on the stone self. Returning to the car, I suddenly discovered the place to be a favorite haunt of **Yellow-lipped Sea Kraits**, one of the deadliest snakes in the world. Unlike most sea snakes, they lay their eggs on ground and several large females were basking in the sun, on the warm volcanic stones. Not aggressive by their nature, these strikingly attractive snakes are no real danger as long as you watch your step and let them pass by. Six Kraits were discovered in a stretch of 150 meters and many others probably lurked in the rock crevices. It had rained during the early afternoon and the mud on the road really stuck on my tires on the way back. Had to stop and do some cleaning with a stick, as soon as the road became dry again.

All in all, bit disappointing seawatching with few nice records such as the **Tahiti Petrels** and **Lesser Frigatebirds**. The shallow lagoons around Grande Terre are too wide to provide a diversity of boobies, petrels and shearwaters. One needs to get closer to the opens seas and breeding islands.



Judging by maps, the reefs appear to be particularly close to coast south of Touho, at Koé, on the northeastern coast. This site could be worth a try. The northern tip of the island looks promising, as well. Otherwise, small islands on the edge of deep seas would provide great vantage points for seabird observations, if a practical way to reach them could be discovered. Furthermore, there are the inter-island ferries: for example, the Betico ferry to Lifou. Given the time is available, it should not be too difficult (or expensive) to get in. It apparently is around five hours one way to Lifou.



Photo 8. Aerial view of the reefs around Grande Terre.