



## BIRD TOURISM REPORTS 8/2016

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# NUG-AS FOREST, CEBU, THE PHILIPPINES



**Fig. 1.** Cebu Pacific has many flights to Cebu City.

August 1<sup>st</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2016, the island of Cebu, in the Philippines, was visited by yours truly. I flew in from Manila, on Cebu Pacific, and paid PHP 2.145 (€40) for my ticket, including extra allowance for baggage and a breakfast. The arrival was at Mactan Airport, off Cebu City, from where I visited Alcoy and the Nug-as Forest, at the southern section of the long and narrow island.

My main target bird species were **Cebu Hawk Owl**, **Black Shama** and **White-vented Whistler**. **Streak-breasted Bulbul** was on a secondary list, as a species unlikely but nevertheless possible. For some reason, the bulbul has prematurely been declared extinct, despite a decade of regular records at the known sites. Well, the regularity of records also depends on the frequency of visits by people looking for them. There are not many local birders on the island and the international visitors are also few, with a tight schedule, much like mine.

**Cebu Flowerpecker** was not on my list, because several Internet sources had incorrectly concluded that also the flowerpecker was already extinct. There unfortunately was not enough time for a more thorough search, because of most of the time had to be spent in unsuccessful travel arrangements for Sumatra, a destination which I visited prior the arrival in the Philippines.

As later found out, Nug-as Forest has few years ago been estimated to hold about 50% of the remaining **Cebu Flowerpeckers**. The rest of the guesstimate less than 100 individuals are thought to be at Mt. Lantoy and at Tabunan Forest. Let us hope they still are there, against the odds of almost complete deforestation. Up-to-date surveys have apparently not been published, perhaps not even conducted?

In the end, all my target birds were seen, despite the short duration of the visit. That is not exceptional in Cebu. I was, however, lucky with the weather, which stayed sunny and calm despite the fact that the typhoon season had already started, in the end of July. The organization of ground services was also successful, enabling me to focus on the birds, as soon as Alcoy was reached. A degree of flexibility was nevertheless required.

The following report has been compiled to encourage others to follow suit and visit Cebu by themselves. In the case of Alcoy and Nug-as Forest (9.712963, 123.452357; see Google Maps), it is not an overwhelming task. On the contrary, the visit may be conducted with a degree of comfort.

## **TRANSPORTATION**

As a rule, it was difficult to find detailed and up-to-date information on birding in Cebu or contact the tourism services there. For example Tabunan Forest, even though relatively close to Cebu City, appeared to be even more difficult to visit than the more distant Nug-as Forest of Alcoy, because of complex travel arrangements (organization of transportation) and more difficult on site conditions (slippery and steep trails etc.), if judged by a lazy cripple like me.

After a guesstimate-based decision to go to Alcoy was made, largely thanks to reports by Budgetbirding.com and Birding2Asia, I reserved accommodation first, with difficulty (more below), and then looked for transportation. In the Internet the general conclusion appeared to be: one either needs to rent a car or hire a taxi to go there. The hotels of Alcoy marketed their own shuttle services, which invariably cost more than a Cebu City taxi. Information on public transportation services such as buses was not easily available.

Renting a car proved to be difficult and also more expensive than a taxi. The rates were significantly higher than in the neighboring Bohol and Negros, for example, not to mention Manila. Additionally, there was the navigation through the Cebu City to be considered. Renting a navigator would increase the already high rental rate a bit more.

Because of the above-mentioned misleading information, I opted for a taxi which was booked with Cebu Airport Transfers, for a relative high price of PHP 2.855 (€53), one way. In practice, they left me stranded at the arrivals. Nobody was there to meet me. In my case, Cebu Airport Transfers was not a company to be trusted, despite mixed opinions in the Internet.

As a result, I walked to the airport taxi line and made a deal with the first driver, a Filipino man with north-east African looks and a first name of Jack, proposing PHP 2.750 (€51) for the ride. He readily agreed and did not argue about the money afterwards, admitting that he had waited rather long for a customer and was happy with such a long ride (2 h), and the good profit. For me, it was a lot, but less than the quotes I had seen.

For the return drive, he agreed to pick me up the next day, but never arrived. After a phone call, it became clear that he had been busy spending his earnings and would not be able to drive until too late in the afternoon. In his explanation, this translated to a 'problem with the car'. For some reason, he had been unable to inform me by phone, too...

For the return to Cebu City, I therefore took a bus (recommended at the Dive Point Alcoy Resort), stopping it at the gate of my accommodation. There are buses between Oslob and Cebu City every five minutes and many of them are fine with air-conditioning, movies and secure luggage compartments. Stop one of the big ones. Snacks may be bought on board. The cost of the ticket was PHP 138 (€2.60). The ride took a bit more time (3.5 h) than a taxi would have taken, partly because of a long truck which had broken across a narrow junction in Cebu City, causing a major traffic jam there.



**Fig. 2.** On board an Alcoy to Cebu City bus, watching a historical drama.

The bus arrived at the secure Cebu South Bus Terminal in Cebu City, where a number of taxis were waiting. I took one of them to Ace Pensionne in Mactan (the island where the airport is located), paying an inflated fee of PHP 320 (€6), because it was the afternoon rush hour (+PHP 100 (€1.9)),

included in the 320). Nevertheless, there were no traffic jams on our way to Mactan. The driver was polite and professional. We had a pleasant talk on the way.

In Alcoy, I still needed to get to the Nug-as Forest, twice. Walking was not really an option because the distance from my accommodation was 10 to 14 km one way, depending on where in the forest I wanted to go. If Narra Park, a restaurant/hotel close to the forest had been interested in my money (more below), the situation would have been different. A tricycle was not an option either, because the narrow tarmac road was too steep for them. This was a major drawback, because I had counted on being able to hire one to take me up and back.

Somewhat stressful inquiries followed. Dive Point Alcoy could have organized a rather expensive 4x4 expedition for a limited period of time, an idea easy to decline. Fortunately, the Filipino lady in charge of their restaurant was business-minded and offered a practical solution. Her husband could do the job, taking me up and down on his motorbike. After some negotiations, we agreed a price of PHP 600 (€10), including two trips up and down for me, and three for him, because he would not wait for me in the morning, the next day, when I was going to stay long. The price was only slightly more than a local motorbike taxi would have cost.

The only remaining problem was that I was scared to travel on the back of the motorbike, the first time for me, expecting to lose balance and get seriously injured. No helmet, no protection for limbs. Nevertheless, up we went because I simply had to score with the Cebu endemics. Our difference in size created a somewhat comical effect. Imagine a determined chimpanzee driving a motorbike, with a scared to death gorilla hanging behind him, hands on the rear carrier!

My death grip was so tight that one finger developed a nerve problem towards the end of the second visit. For six months afterwards, the finger remained numb. I also vividly remember how I felt on the coastal highway, driving through potholes, zooming buses and trucks...

Well, expanding one's limits has its benefits, too. I experienced something new, which does not happen so often nowadays. One tends to stay within one's comfort zone. I would rather walk alone in a West Bank city, Palestine, at night, which I have done, than travel 100 meters on a motorbike, as a passenger.

If riding on the back of a motorbike is too much for you, it is also possible to negotiate the car service with the resort. I do not know if there are taxis in Alcoy, in addition to the ever-present motorbike ones.

If really fit, one might also consider walking the distance, but that would be more almost 30 km a day, up and down, albeit on tarmac. Alternatively, one could take a motorbike ride up and walk down the 10 to 14 kilometers, including some forest trails.

## ACCOMMODATION

Renting a room in Alcoy was more difficult in August than I had anticipated. Some dive hotels close for the typhoon season and other establishments do not necessarily bother with foreign customers. In this part of the world, the majority of coastal dive resorts are run by German entrepreneurs, who can be trusted to reply an email from Europe, but the Filipino managers are less reliable in that sense. On the other hand, the hotel business tends to be an expensive hobby for the foreigners, who struggle to make a living there, but the locals may be more successful, because of their wider local contacts, which bring in more customers, such as organizational meetings.

Close to the Nug-as Forest, the obvious choice would have been the Narra Park Restaurant, high up along the Nug-as Forest road, where the climate is more pleasant than down below. The place also has a number of rooms for rent and was open during my visit. Unfortunately, they never replied to my several attempts to contact them. I guess a one night stay was considered peanuts, not worth their while. Narra Park could be fine for tour groups, too, because of its close proximity to good birding habitats and its ability to cater for groups.

Instead, I stayed at **Dive Point Alcoy Resort**, Alcoy (€35, an Agoda price): In August, the typhoon season, many of the coastal dive resorts close, as already mentioned, and the staffs have their annual vacations. Repairs are also often made during the off season. The ones which stay open tend to be almost empty and may adopt competitive low season room rates. This may attract also divers who desire to avoid the crowds. The Dive Point Alcoy Resort belonged to the latter category. It was located at 9.686246, 123.503629.



**Fig. 3.** A view from my Dive Point Alcoy Resort accommodation.

Their small but efficient restaurant had a good selection of cold drinks, meals and smaller servings, for fair prices. I also bought some drinks at a local market, on the way back from the forest, in order to cut expenses. The room was a bit spartan, but adequate for my purposes. Most importantly, the staff helped me in many ways, providing sound advice and solving the problems in reaching the forest and its birds.

The help was important at this stage of my RTW. Seven weeks on the road already, I was admittedly a bit tired towards the end of the self-made tour.

**Ace Pensionne**, Mactan Island, Cebu City (€36, an Agoda price): At first sight, this hotel with some Japanese influences appeared to be well and efficiently managed. I already gave positive feedback at the reception. Later, I found out some problems with room management, problems which were aggravated by the fact that I was tired, sweaty and hungry, and would have preferred to have a shower and a meal as soon as possible, before resting in my clean, soft bed, and watching television.

Unfortunately, I had to return twice to the reception first. Initially, there were no towels in the room. Then, somebody had programmed the television in a mode where the volume was stuck in the maximum. The problems were solved in reasonable time.

One great feature of Ace Pensionne is that there is the Gaisano Mall right across the street. It is a good place to buy food, drinks and snacks. When I was there, there even was a section with Arla dairy products, the Swedish goods also familiar to us Finns. No need to look for restaurants after a visit at the mall. I had a feast in my room after the television had been fixed and it was possible to see the latest news, not to mention some entertaining movies. A hot pizza with extra fresh pineapple, cold drinks etc.

At Ace Pensionne, a transfer to the airport was included in the room rate. In the morning, the hotel shuttle driver was, however, 'ill'. In other words, he did not want to get up at 05.00. The guard therefore ordered a taxi instead, and paid him directly (PHP 40 (€0.75)! The driver agreed to take me to the airport, but was not happy at all. He had apparently expected more from a tourist; definitely not the local price.

At the airport, he did not even bother to step out of the car, to help me to empty the trunk. So angry he was. I myself, on the other hand, was happy when the Cebu Pacific ATR flight (DG 6462), one of their shortest connections, had an on-time departure to Bacolod, Negros.

The various prices in this report may give some idea on the differences between tourist and local prices in Cebu...

## BIRDS

In the first evening, we went up to the forest and the motorbike was stopped at a certain corner of the road. I left my driver there, and walked a short distance up, first looking and then only listening for the birds, as it got completely dark. Fortunately, it was dead calm and the sky was clear. We then returned back to the hotel.

In the next morning, we went up at sunrise, some distance further up into the best forest, from where I walked down on the road, almost to the Narra Park, before being picked up again and given a ride to the hotel, around noon. During the walk, I followed one obvious trail to the right in the bush, at a spot which had ample parking space. The remained sunny and calm.

The road had surprisingly many motorbikes zooming up and down. Fortunately, there were no signs of poaching, even though the birds were wary and afraid of people, as often is the case in the Philippines. As the time went on, my bird list developed, one by one. The following list may not be an extensive one and it clearly reflects an impoverished habitat, but it nevertheless includes the important species. In other words, I comfortably scored with all of my main Cebu target species during the two visits, two of them being endemic and one shared only with the island of Siquijor, unless split as **Cebu Bulbul**. And then there was the odd flowerpecker, difficult to identify because of its immature plumage.



**Fig. 4.** High up on the Nug-as Forest road; two **Streak-breasted Bulbuls** were seen at this point. Pockets of tall trees exist here and there and illegal cutting has apparently ceased, at least for the time being. The island of Bohol may be seen in the far horizon.

Already at first sight, the immature (male) flowerpecker which was observed along the above-mentioned forest trail was a confusing one. I saw the bird very closely (4-5 m), for a minute or two, on top of a bush where it arrived without seeing me. My first impression was a **Bicolored Flowerpecker** (a species not extant in Cebu), because of the bird's matching colors, jizz and bill.

At the time of my visit, I did not know that Alcoy and Nug-as potentially had **Cebu Flowerpeckers**, and therefore did not include the species in my initial speculations. A closer inspection did, however, point toward the latter species, even though the identification criteria remain unclear.

It was a bird with black upperside (from my angle, it was not possible to see if any red-tipped feathers existed on its back, or the color of the rump), white throat and belly, with cold greyish sides. The legs were black. Unlike with **Red-keeled Flowerpecker**, there was no sign of red or buff feathers in center of the pure white belly. The tip of the bill was black and the lower inner half bright pink (no yellow or orange hue). The bill was thick but more pointed than most of the illustrations of **Cebu Flowerpecker** claim (more below). It did not, however, look like the long and slender bill of a **Red-keeled Flowerpecker**. The bird remained completely silent, standing or moving around on top of the bush, apparently feeding on small insects.

The pink in the bill is supposed to be a feature of an immature **Cebu Flowerpecker**. There is, however, very little information on the identification of juvenile or immature birds. Moreover, the information on bill size and shape is very confusing, the illustrators having adopted significantly different views on the matter. The **Bicolored Flowerpecker** type but a larger bill I saw on the bird agrees best with the illustrations in Helm and HBW publications and by Joseph Smit. It did not, however, quite agree with the A Guide to the Birds of the Philippines (Melinda Johns Bitting), George Sandström's (du Pont) or Richard Allen's illustrations, which had smaller and more rounded bills. Neither had the bird the wedge-shaped massive beak as illustrated by Tomasz Cofta.

I am not criticizing the valuable illustrations as such, but merely pointing out differences between them. In regard to **Cebu Flowerpecker**, reference materials are inadequate, to say the least, and drawing accurate illustrations therefore difficult.

Fortunately, there is one resource in the Internet which has Smithsonian National Museum skin photos of adult birds from three different angles, the Oriental Bird Images. The skins themselves may be a bit 'out-of-shape' (stuffed as museum skins in 1892) but the bills show well, with an appearance which agrees with the bird I saw. (Moreover, as the photos show, an adult male is not quite as brightly colored as many illustrations claim. The bright colors on the back and rump are extensively mixed with black and more concealed than the guide book illustrations tend to portray).

So, if the pink in the bill and its shape really are diagnostic and there is no new contradictory information, the above-mentioned features appear to lean towards **Cebu Flowerpecker**, instead of **Red-keeled Flowerpecker**, the common species one would expect to see on such a short visit. If



wrong in my conclusions, I would be grateful to receive more informed views from those who are familiar with immature **Red-keeled** and **Cebu Flowerpeckers**.

The pair of **Streak-breasted Bulbuls** was found in a section with the few remaining tall trees. I saw them in the very beginning, soon after sunrise, with **Philippine Bulbuls** for comparison. The bird activity was pretty strong during the first hour, but decreased soon afterwards. The **Pink-necked Pigeons** are nowadays scarce in Cebu, but there may be some seasonality in their occurrence. The recent records in Nug-as Forest have occurred in August, as far as I have been able to find out.

The funniest sight of the morning was the **Barred Buttonquails**! They apparently thought that they could cross the road right behind my back, unnoticed, but I happened to notice their movement at the fringe of my vision. There was something comical in the upright pair, hesitant in their walk but nevertheless adamant to cross over, the colorful male in front and the tiny juvenile following right behind, mimicking the movements of its 'daddy'. There is no extensive closed canopy forest left in the Nug-as Forest, but the remaining bush is thick. One never knows what might be lurking under the cover.

No **Coppersmith Barbets**, for some reason. Not even a single one calling! In regard to swiftlets, I wish there was a way to separate the **Ameline** and **Philippine Swiftlets** in the field. As far as I am able to judge, they are inseparable. As a general rule, the former is supposed to be a lowland and coastal species, and the latter occurs over submontane forests. Their distribution may nevertheless overlap on most islands.

## IN RETROSPECT

Much like in most islands and sites in the Philippines, both visiting and local birders are scarce in Cebu and their activities tend to be focused on the same sites and seasons. The shortage of well-located basic services and information on them shortens the visits to the island. The few academic surveys have revealed interesting new information but suffer from limited coverage, both in terms of time and space. As a result, there is a need for additional information to develop a more comprehensive understanding on the resident and migratory populations of birds in Cebu, including seasonality and the actual composition of the local avifauna, especially in the case of difficult to identify, challenging to observe and scarce species. In this regard, we visiting birders may also offer our modest contributions, if we make our records available some way or another.

Looking back, I would do certain things differently. First of all, I would take a taxi from the airport to Cebu South Bus Terminal, and then a large and air-conditioned bus to Alcoy. That would not only save money but the drive would be more comfortable, too. Alternatively, if with adequate funds, I would consider renting a sedan, to enable maximum freedom of movements locally in Alcoy. Second, I would try to stay additional days in Alcoy, to get better views of the skulking endemics, and perhaps to be able to photograph them.

There are alternative sites to locate the endemics of Cebu and the Western Visayas, depending on one's preferences and needs. Many do visit the Tabunan Forest, a classical choice, and Mt. Lantoy area is a possible destination, too, on the way to Alcoy. Hopefully this report has provided some information which is helpful in the process of decision-making. With its setbacks and limited time, it may not have been a perfect trip, but I nevertheless managed to do the visit by myself, with the help of local service providers, and within a reasonable budget. Most importantly, the main target species were seen, whatever the final result of the mystery flowerpecker identification may be.

**Good luck with your visit in Alcoy and at the Nug-as Forest!**

### **Bird list (28-29 species)**

<b>Cebu Hawk Owl</b>	2, in the evening.
<b>Barred Rail</b>	2
<b>Barred Buttonquail</b>	1 male with a chick crossed the road in full view!
<b>Collared Kingfisher</b>	3, <i>collaris</i> .
<b>Pink-necked Green Pigeon</b>	8, said to have almost disappeared from Cebu?
<b>White-eared Dove</b>	2
<b>Philippine Cuckoo-Dove</b>	1
<b>Spotted Dove</b>	1
<b>Philippine Coucal</b>	3
<b>Pygmy Swiftlet</b>	3
<b>Ameline Swiftlet?</b>	10
<b>Hooded Pitta</b>	5, pretty active in August, at the start of rainy season.
<b>Pacific Swallow</b>	4, <i>javanica</i> .
<b>Pied Triller</b>	1 male, 1 female.
<b>Philippine Bulbul</b>	60, about.
<b>Streak-breasted Bulbul</b>	2, <i>monticola</i> , sometimes split as <b>Cebu Bulbul</b> .
<b>Philippine Magpie-Robin</b>	4
<b>Black Shama</b>	4, most active just before sunset, very shy and skulking.
<b>Philippine Pied Fantail</b>	6
<b>White-vented Whistler</b>	6, <i>major</i> .
<b>Black-naped Oriole</b>	1
<b>Asian Glossy Starling</b>	10, about.
<b>Elegant Tit</b>	1 adult with 3 juveniles, <i>visayanus</i> .
<b>Olive-backed Sunbird</b>	10, about.
<b>Purple-throated Sunbird</b>	8; 6 in one feeding party.
<b>Red-keeled Flowerpecker</b>	1 adult.
<b>Cebu Flowerpecker?</b>	1 immature male? (see text).
<b>Chestnut Munia</b>	4
<b>Tree Sparrow</b>	10, about.