

Gurney's Eagle *Aquila gurneyi* at Saibai on 12 October 2007.

Submission to BARC Case # 1130 prepared 6th April 2020 to accompany Case # 1131, a Gurney's Eagle at same place on 13th March 2020

By Mike Carter

Below is a note that I wrote shortly after the sighting. General information about the trip on which this was seen is contained in the attached report by Phil Hansbro.

A single Gurney's Eagle was watched for from 2 to 5 minutes at a range of about 500 m soaring above the mangrove forest on the northern coast of Saibai on 12 October 2007. It was near the mouth of a river 6 km east of the township. All ten observers on the trip, travelling in two small boats, saw the bird. I was one of six in the leading boat, the main tender, licensed to take ten passengers, belonging to our cruiser. Thus it was a substantial craft providing a relatively stable observation platform. The other four followed in a dinghy.

We had a clear sustained view of the bird looking up at a comfortable angle of ~30°. The weather was bright, hot and humid, almost calm. It was partially cloudy and the bird was viewed against a background of thin cloud and blue sky. I used 7 x 50 Zeiss binoculars.

It was immediately apparent that this was an all-dark, large *Aquila* eagle. Although no other birds were available for direct comparison, large size was confirmed by subsequent sightings (within a few minutes) of soaring Australian Pelicans at a similar distance and then a Darter flushed as we entered the river. The head was small. It had long, broad, distinctively shaped, fingered wings, held flat with a slight upward curl of the primaries. The leading edge of the wings was almost straight but slightly concave between the body and the carpal then slightly swept back to the tip. The trailing edge had a marked bow across the secondaries but was straight at the primaries, parallel to the leading edge. The very rounded tail was of medium length, fanned so that its width at the tip was twice that at its base.

Although it was wholly dark with no discernable pattern it was not black, probably dark brown. It appeared paler than I had anticipated although Frank Pierce commented that it appeared darker than he'd expected. A jet-black male Darter seen shortly after definitely appeared darker.

The above description fits Gurney's Eagle and no other raptor.

Torres Strait trip 1 – Trip report 7-14th October 2007 by Phil Hansbro & Richard Baxter

Edited by Mike Carter

This is the first of 3 trips to Australian Northern Torres Strait Islands of Boigu, Saibai and Dauan in search of rare Australian birds and vagrants from New Guinea and elsewhere. Trip 2 is currently ongoing (16-23rd Oct 2007) and trip 3 is booked for November 2008.

There are around 4 places remaining on trip 3. The trips were organised by Richard Baxter and Phil Hansbro, of Birding Tours Australia. The other participants on the trip were Gail D'Alton, Rob Berry, Rob Quinan, Tom Smith, Frank Pierce, Stuart Pell, Mark Taylor and Mike Carter.

Horn Island 6-7th Oct

We assembled at Horn Island from various parts of Australia and had an afternoon of productive birding. Walking around the town we managed to find our first real northern birds of the trip, which included; Rose-crowned Fruit-Dove, Pied Imperial-Pigeon, Radjah Shelduck, a variety of migrant waders, Black-necked Stork, Blue-winged Kookaburra, Helmeted Friarbird, Red-headed, Varied and Dusky Honeyeaters as well as Broad-billed Flycatcher. On the morning of the 7th we commissioned our provisions from the bottle-shop and boarded the 60-foot air-conditioned cruiser "San Miguel" (operated by Northern Blue Charters), which would be our home for the next week. We left Horn Island and cruised to our first stop, Little Tuesday Island. On the way we located many large noddy and tern flocks and had good numbers of Black-naped, Lesser Crested, Sooty and Bridled Terns as well as Common and Black Noddies.

Little Tuesday Island 7th of Oct

It only took just over an hour to reach this island, which was the site of our search for the restricted range Pale White-eye, which is a Torres Strait endemic. We landed on the island and were greeted by a pair of Beach Thick-knees and we soon began to search the island for land birds. We quickly located Rufous Fantails, which turned out to be the commonest bird on the island as well as Dusky and Red-headed Honeyeaters. Then we located a fruiting tree and all managed to get excellent views of the White-eyes seeing 10 in total and a Rose-crowned Fruit-Dove. We also searched the scrub and mangroves for other birds and found many Pied Imperial-Pigeons, Mangrove Golden Whistler, Broad-billed Flycatcher and Spectacled Monarch. Migration is more evident in this part of Australia than anywhere else and we observed a flock of 30 Bee-eaters migrating as well as 15 White-throated Needletails. We left the island and headed off to Boigu which was 10 hours steaming. We saw Lesser Frigatebird as we were leaving and caught up with other large tern and noddy flocks on the journey. Surprisingly we came across a flock of all dark migrating land birds, which in the end we decided were most likely Spangled Drongos.

Boigu 8-10th Oct

We spent 2.5 days on Boigu, which proved to be very productive. On the first day we arrived ashore before dawn and headed straight to the wetlands near the airport in search of Spotted Whistling-Ducks. We stopped on the way to look at the next Torres Strait speciality, Singing Starlings that have made the areas around the village their home. No luck with the ducks, although we did find nice flocks of Wandering Whistling Ducks and the New Guinea race of Radjah Shelduck. We spent the rest of the morning exploring the island for other specialities and vagrants. Some species are surprisingly common on the island including; Pied Heron, Rufous Night-Heron, Whimbrel, Common Sandpiper, Gull-billed Tern, Bar-shouldered Dove, Pied Imperial-Pigeon, Rainbow Bee-eater, Tawny-breasted, Varied, Brown-backed and Red-headed Honeyeaters, White-breasted Woodswallow, Spangled Drongo (including the endemic northern Torres Strait race), Yellow-bellied Sunbird and Golden-headed Cisticola. We visited several areas of forest in search of such rarities as Papuan Flowerpecker and Collared Imperial-Pigeon and we stopped only to return back to the boat for lunch. We had tantalising but brief views of both the Flowerpecker and Collared Imp Pigeon but were compensated by a range of other excellent birds. Red-backed Button-quail were relatively easy to see on the island and we had excellent views of this normally very shy species. A pair of Little Whimbrel frequented the airstrip everyday and a cracking male Eclectus Parrot flew over our heads giving excellent views. Other birds of note were Orange-footed Scrubfowl, Buff-banded Rail, Wood Sandpiper, Shining Flycatcher, Black Butcherbird and Large-billed Gerygone. The next morning we returned to resume our search and this time extended our route to cover many more wetlands in the interior of the island. This turned up many more waders and other waterbirds but no more whistling-ducks. We did get some interesting other species including the first of our Large-tailed Nightjar and Cicadabird sightings. We headed into some mangrove forest and were finally rewarded with excellent views of a superb male Papuan Flowerpecker that allowed good photographic opportunities. Just before lunch we headed back to the boat and located an 'Eastern' Yellow Wagtail *M. f. tschutschensis* (previously *simillima*). After lunch we boarded our zodiac and had a very enjoyable cruise up the Boigu River to a beach on the far side of the island. We heard many Kingfishers and sighted a Little kingfisher and a Red-cheeked Parrot flew overhead calling. A pair of Collared Imperial-Pigeons also flew over but only one or two people got reasonable views. We returned to the village to have another check for the ducks but no luck and we headed back to the boat. Another exploration of the island next morning relocated Flowerpeckers at the same site. More Collared Imperial-Pigeons flew over and this time some people finally got good views of two birds. Late morning we headed back to the boat (with 25 fresh mud-crabs for dinner!!) and headed off to Saibai.

Saibai 10th-12th Oct

We arrived in the afternoon and immediately went ashore. We headed to some tall woodland where we soon found our first Collared Imperial-Pigeons, which we flushed so didn't give good views. We then found several more, which we also flushed before finding some perched which did give excellent views of this stunning bird. We waited by a creek for a while and were rewarded by a close fly-by of Little Kingfisher. While waiting, we also had good views of pairs of Black Butcherbirds and Northern Fantails. Walking through the town to the airstrip we watched a pair of Ospreys at their nest and at the runway were 4 Little Curlews. The next day we explored other areas of the island and visited known sites for rarities. We started to the east of the settlement and then visited the west side as well. The walks produced our first Channel-billed Cuckoos as well as Spectacled Monarch and several Black Butcherbirds. We arrived at a creek to the east and within a few minutes a Little Kingfisher gave the first of two fly-pasts. A pair of Collared Kingfishers was beginning a nest in a termite mound. Several more Collared Imperial-Pigeons flew over and we managed to get excellent views of an immature male Papuan Flowerpecker. A stop at the airfield produced the first Oriental Plover record for the northern Torres Strait islands and the 4 Little Curlew were still there. At the rubbish tip we found the first Zitting Cisticola of the trip and one of 3 obliging Pheasant Coucals of the day, which are very dark in this region. After lunch we boarded a Ute and headed to the interior of the island to a series of swamps. Here there were hundreds of Egrets, a flock of 240 Straw-necked Ibis and many waders including Sharp-tailed and Marsh Sandpipers, Greenshank and Red-necked Stint but the highlight was 2 Australian Pratincoles. We also had several tantalising views of large raptors and a flock of 40 migrating Spangled Drongos. On the drive we saw 3 Brown Goshawks of the [dogwa] race, 2 Brolga and a fine male Eclectus Parrot. We finished off with a cleansing ale at the bar. Up early again but attempts to land on the island were aborted. The tide was very low and a barge was blocking the slipway so we returned to the boat for a sleep-in but we did watch our now pet Ospreys eating fish on the marker posts. Mid-morning we boarded zodiacs for a trip along a river that proved to be most rewarding starting well with 3 Black-necked Storks on the mudflats. We then headed to the mouth of the river and soon found a large Eagle soaring above [the mudflats adjacent mangrove forest](#). The bird was all dark brown with bulging secondaries and a long rounded tail. All birders saw the bird and agreed it was a Gurney's Eagle. This is around the 4-5th record for Australia and was potentially the 800th bird for Mike Carter.

Dauan 12th-13th Oct

After lunch we travelled to the close-by island of Dauan. Here we walked around the village and explored the woodlands of the islands. Pied Imperial Pigeons proved to be very common and we saw several Australian Koels and 3 Eclectus Parrots. A lucky few flushed a nightjar and had good enough views to identify it as a [White-throated Nightjar]. *(When this bird flew past Richard Baxter he said that he thought that it looked rufous. Rohan Clarke advises that early one morning he saw a similar bird where there were several Large-tailed Nightjars. Hoping he'd found a Papuan Nightjar that evening he set a mist-net and caught it. After some*

research, he eventually identified it as a worn juvenile Large-tailed Nightjar.) Another new bird for the trip and an endemic subspecies was Mangrove Golden Whistler. We headed back to the boat and saw a total of 15 Channel-billed cuckoos flying the wrong way. We spent all next day exploring the island, with a break for an extended lunch during the hot part of the day. There were no rarities but we did managed to find some new birds for the trip. A real highlight was at least 7 Noisy Pittas of the New Guinea race and excellent views of Rose-crowned Fruit-Dove, as well as 6 Eclectus Parrots. New for the trip were 3 Forest Kingfishers, Emerald Dove, 5 Greater Sand and a single Grey Plover. We also saw large numbers of some species with 50 Grey-tailed Tattler, 10 Lesser Sand Plover, 10 Koels, 25 Channel-billed Cuckoos and 100 Yellow-bellied Sunbird, at least 10 Large-billed Gerygones, 20 Shining Flycatcher and 8 Rufous Fantail. Other highlights were Buff-banded Rail, Red-backed Button-Quail, 2 Mangrove Golden Whistler and 3 immature Black-faced Cuckoo-Shrike. We left at 3.00 a.m. next morning for the trip back to Horn Island.

Dauan-Horn Island 14th Oct

A quiet day today and we were back on Horn Island by 11.00am. On the way we saw a few terns including Sooty, Bridled, Black-naped and Lesser Crested and again 5 migrating Spangled Drongo. Back to our hotel and a very enjoyable day relaxing and chatting.

For butterfly enthusiasts we also saw at least 30 species of butterflies.

If you would like to have a copy of our log or come along in November 2008 email myself (Phil.Hansbro@newcastle.edu.au) or Richard (randrbaxter@yahoo.com).