

Seychelles, Mauritius & Reunion

2017 Tour Report



Barau's Petrel

*Text by tour leader Michael Mills
Photos by tour participant Colin Rogers*

The remote oceanic islands of Seychelles, Mauritius, Rodrigues and Reunion are renowned for their palm-lined, white-sand beaches, and in the case of Reunion, it's active volcano. From the birder's perspective, these island are characterised by high degrees of endemism, spectacular seabird breeding colonies, heroic conservation efforts and, unfortunately, irreplaceable losses such as the extinct Dodo.

Our inaugural bird watching tour to these islands was a resounding success, with virtually all possible species recorded.



Seychelles Paradise Flycatcher

REPORT

With almost everyone having arrived half a day early for the trip, we commenced our birding in the interior of Mahé Island in the Seychelles where in the first three hours of birding we cleaned up on the endemic landbirds of the island. We started off with **Seychelles Sunbird** and **Seychelles Bulbul**, and it was only a matter of minutes before we lured a pair of very rare (fewer than 100 individuals on Mahé) **Seychelles White-eyes** in for close-up views. Introduced Zebra Dove, Common Myna, Madagascar Red Fody and Madagascar Turtle Dove were in evidence too, as were some noisy **White-tailed Tropicbirds**. Moving on towards the central highlands of Mahé we paused for roadside views of **Seychelles Blue Pigeon** and **Seychelles Swiftlet**, and just before sunset we found our first **Seychelles Kestrel** dust bathing. After dark the hoarse call of **Seychelles Scops Owl** was heard and it wasn't long before we had drawn one bird in for good views in the spotlight, before retracing our steps back to Victoria for our first Creole buffet dinner.

another on a night roost. Much of the rest of the day was spent wader watching, although a successful detour was also made in search of **Yellow Bittern**. More common waterbirds seen included **Curlew Sandpiper**, **Grey Plover**, **Common Greenshank** and **Whimbrel**, with more memorable species including some lovely **Crab-Plovers**, a vagrant **Caspian Plover**, a couple of **Terek Sandpiper** and two **Saunders's Terns**.

The next day we changed base to Praslin Island, where we enjoyed excellent views of **Seychelles Black Parrot** and a seawatch produced a **Brown Booby** among the **Wedge-tailed Shearwaters** and couple of **Tropical Shearwaters**. From Praslin we made visits to three of the surrounding islands. The first was to the private island of Cousine where **Seychelles Magpie-Robin**, **Seychelles Fody** and **Seychelles Warbler** were seen well and with ease, and large numbers of seabirds were seen at close range. Side-by-side views of **Lesser Noddy** and



White Tern

The following day, with everyone now arrived, we repeated the previous day's efforts on the endemic birds, this time improving our views of **Seychelles Kestrel** with a bird spotted in the late morning perched on some scaffolding near the coast, and

Brown Noddy allowed for useful comparisons, and **White Tern**, **White-tailed Tropicbird** and **Wedge-tailed Shearwater** were seen on the nest. **Greater Frigatebird** circled overhead and several **Bridled Tern** were seen too.

Our task on La Digue Island was more straightforward, and even before arriving at Le Veuve Reserve had we seen a lovely pair of **Seychelles Paradise Flycatcher**, with more to follow at the reserve itself.

However, the highlight was Aride Island where the fody, warbler and magpie-robin seen again, and memorable seabirds included **Tropical Shearwater** on the nest (number 9000 for Jürgen!), **Bridled Tern** on the nest, lots of **Sooty Terns** in various plumages and two **Lesser Frigatebirds** among the many **Greater Frigatebirds**. We also saw a lost **Western Yellow Wagtail**.

During our transit back through Mahé Island a short stint of wader watching produced a vagrant **Gull-billed Tern** and singles of **Eurasian Curlew** and **White-winged Tern**, before we left behind the laid-back and very tropical islands of Seychelles for the more developed Mascarene Islands of Mauritius, Rodrigues and Réunion. While the granitic Seychelles are of ancient Gondwanan derivation, the Mascarene islands of much more recent volcanic origin.

On Mauritius, a stint of introductory birding along the start of the Macchabée Trail through the world-famous Black River Gorges National Park quickly turned up **Mauritius Cuckooshrike**, **Pink Pigeon**, **Mauritius Fody** and **Mauritius Grey White-eye**, and distant flight views of **Echo Parakeet**. The next morning we tried another section of the reserve where we immediately found a single **Mauritius Olive White-eye** and **Mascarene Swiftlet**. More **Pink Pigeons** were admired at Pigeon Wood



Mascarene Paradise Flycatcher



Mauritius Kestrel

before we enjoyed good views of **Mascarene Paradise Flycatcher**, just in time for our departure for a pelagic trip to Round Island off the north of Mauritius. Our comfortable fishing boat made easy work of getting out to Round Island and nearby Serpent Island, and as we approached the sea was heaving with noddies, **Sooty Terns** and tropicbirds including our first **Red-tailed Tropicbirds**. Several **Masked Boobies** passed near our boat, and then it was time to focus on tubenoses. **Wedge-tailed Shearwaters** were the most common, but we also enjoyed views of about 20 **Round Island Petrels** in various plumages. A couple of birds, and one in particular with strong white primary feather shafts visible on the upperwing, seemed to be very good matches for Kermadec Petrel, and a few were good matches for Trindade Petrel, although many birds had intermediate plumages. Studying photographs afterwards also indicated one bird that

matched Herald Petrel well, but as explained to us by research leader Vikash Tatayah, these birds that breed on Round Island are a hybrid swarm of the three petrels, with no birds seemingly genetically pure... lots to think about.

During the rest of our time on Mauritius we visited the impressive habitat rehabilitation project of the Mauritian Wildlife Foundation at Ile aux Aigrettes, where we enjoyed more views of reintroduced **Mauritius Fody**, **Mauritius Olive White-eye** and **Pink Pigeon**, plus several rare reptiles including Telfair's Skink and Ornate Day Gecko. Another spot produced **Mauritius Kestrel** at close range, and a return visit to Macchabée Forest gave perched views of several female and one male **Echo Parakeet** and two more **Mauritius Cuckooshrikes**.

The next port of call was Rodrigues Island, politically part of Mauritius although located some 600 km to the east. Fortunately there are daily flights to the island, and shortly after being deposited at the airport we were admiring our first **Rodrigues Fody** and **Rodrigues Warbler** at Solitude, the latter rather prinia-like in the way it used its tail. The next morning we visited another impressive Mauritian Wildlife Foundation rehabilitation site, Grande Montagne, where more fodies and warblers were enjoyed at close range.



Rodrigues Fody

Now onto the final stint of the trip, we flew back to Mauritius and on the Saint Denis on Réunion Island, the most recently formed of the Mascarenes and still volcanically active. Early the next morning we snaked our way up into the highlands above Saint Denis to the famous La Roche Écrite trail head. The weather was perfect – cloudless skies and windless. **Reunion Stonechat** was seen on the edge of the car park as we headed off, and as we climbed we found our first of many **Reunion Olive White-eyes**. Our plan was to get into range of the very rare **Reunion Cuckooshrike** as early as possible, and it wasn't long before we could hear a bird calling in the distance. We repositioned ourselves a couple of times before we managed to draw a bird into a tall tree beside the trail; it was a smart male. It was moving around quite actively, but we waited on the trail and eventually enjoyed some very close views. With the biggie under the belt we climbed higher, finding **Reunion Grey White-eye**, **Mascarene Paradise Flycatcher** and **Reunion Bulbul**, but the best area for Reunion Harrier was too far to reach in the time available to us, so we descended back down to the trail head, hearing another two Reunion Cuckooshrikes and seeing many more white-eyes and paradise flycatchers. A **Reunion Harrier** appeared very briefly over the car park just after we arrived back at the vehicle, but most people missed seeing it.

It was now time to focus on seabirds, and we made our way down the west coast to board a fishing boat for our final pelagic trip. The seas were very calm and flat, and as we headed out to sea we quickly found our first **Barau's Petrels** and a single **Bulwer's Petrel** passed not too far away from the boat. As the afternoon passed the numbers of seabirds built up, with lots of **Tropical Shearwaters** seen at close range alongside hundreds more **Barau's Petrels** and **Short-tailed Shearwaters**. The numbers of tubenoses was spectacular!

The next day we made our way to the central part of the island to look for the missing harrier. Conditions were much less pleasant – cloudy and quite windy. A detailed study was made of **Mascarene Swiftlet** and perched **Mascarene Martin**, and only after breakfast did we find our first harrier, a young male hunting along the edge of a field, which dropped out of sight but was spotted a bit later sitting in the field. Our drive back to Saint Denis produced



Reunion Cuckooshrike

a female harrier flying along the edge of the road, and we managed to stop on the verge of the road for some excellent fly-by views. In Saint Denis itself a full adult male harrier was also spotted, bringing our harrier total to six birds!

The final stint of birding before the end of the tour was a seawatch from the south-west coast of the island. Again the numbers of tubenoses was spectacular, and we enjoyed an afternoon filled with **Barau's Petrels**, **Tropical Shearwaters** and **Short-tailed Shearwaters**, a fitting end to a very successful trip.



Pink Pigeon

ANNOTATED SPECIES LIST

Family Phasianidae - Pheasants and allies

Grey Francolin *Francolinus pondicerianus*. Introduced. A single bird was seen on Ile aux Aigrettes on Mauritius.

Family Procellariidae - Petrels, Shearwaters

Round Island Petrel *Pterodroma arminjoniana x neglecta x heraldica*. We saw about 20 of these petrels around Round Island off Mauritius. Some birds seemed to be classic Kermadec Petrels, some were a good fit Trindade Petrel, and some also showed features of Herald Petrel. These birds are now known to be a three-way hybrid swarm, possibly also including Phoenix Petrel, with no genetically pure birds. What to tick?!

***Barau's Petrel** *Pterodroma baraui*. Hundreds, possibly thousands of these birds were seen at sea around Réunion. On our pelagic trip we had close fly-by views and birds perched on the ocean, and during our seawatch enjoyed many hundreds milling around just beyond the breakers. Voted bird of the trip!

Wedge-tailed Shearwater *Ardenna pacifica*. First seen in the Seychelles, on the nest on Cousine Island, on a seawatch off Praslin Island and on the nest on Aride Island. Also seen in good numbers on the Round Island pelagic and off Réunion.

Tropical Shearwater *Puffinus [lherminieri] bailloni*. First seen in the Seychelles, distantly during the seawatch off Praslin Island and then at close range on the nest on Aride Island (**nicolae*), where it was Jürgen's 9000th bird! We also enjoyed great views of hundreds during the pelagic and seawatch on Réunion (*bailloni*).

Bulwer's Petrel *Bulweria bulwerii*. One was seen reasonably well during the pelagic trip off Réunion.

Tropicbirds Family Phaethontidae

Red-tailed Tropicbird *Phaethon rubricauda*. Seen well during the pelagic trip to Round Island (*rubricauda*).

White-tailed Tropicbird *Phaethon lepturus*. Seen in good numbers on Seychelles, and also on Mauritius and Réunion (*lepturus*).

Hérons, Bitterns Family Ardeidae

Yellow Bittern *Ixobrychus sinensis*. Fantastic views of a single bird on Mahé Island in Seychelles, and also seen by Jürgen on La Digue Island.

Black-crowned Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*. One seen on Mahé Island in Seychelles (*nycticorax*).

Striated Heron *Butorides striata*. Quite a few were seen in the Seychelles, especially on Mahé Island (**degens*); one seen on Réunion (**rutenbergi*).

Western Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*. Seen on Mahé Island in Seychelles.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*. Seen well in the Seychelles (*firasa*).

Family Fregatidae - Frigatebirds

Great Frigatebird *Fregata minor*. Seen in good numbers in the Seychelles (*aldabrensis*).

Lesser Frigatebird *Fregata ariel*. Two seen on Aride Island in the Seychelles, a third-year female and a fourth-year female (*iredalei*).

Family Sulidae - Gannets, Boobies

Masked Booby *Sula dactylatra*. Good views of about 20 during the Round Island pelagic (*melanops*).

Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster*. One seen during the seawatch off Praslin Island in Seychelles (*plotus*).

Family Accipitridae - Kites, Hawks and Eagles

***Reunion Harrier** *Circus maillardi*. Six seen on Réunion: first very brief views of one at the car park of La Roche Écrite, then good looks in the centre of the island, followed by close up views of a female flying along the highway in the north-east of the island (we managed to stop in time to watch it pass us), and a second seen by Denzil, and finally a male flying over St Denis!

Family Rallidae - Rails, Crakes and Coots

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*. Seen in good numbers in the Seychelles (*orientalis*).

Family Dromadidae - Crab-plover

Crab-plover *Dromas ardeola*. Some great views on during both wader-watching outings on Mahé Island in the Seychelles, with at least 16 birds seen during our second outing.

Family Charadriidae - Plovers

Grey Plover | Black-bellied Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*. Seen in the Seychelles (*squatarola*).

Greater Sand Plover *Charadrius leschenaultii*. Seen on Mahé Island in the Seychelles.

Caspian Plover *Charadrius asiaticus*. One non-breeding bird seen on Mahé Island in the Seychelles, where it is a rare vagrant.

Family Scolopacidae - Sandpipers, Snipes

Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica*. Seen in the Seychelles.

Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus*. Seen in the Seychelles.

Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata*. Seen in the Seychelles.

Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*. Seen in the Seychelles.

Terek Sandpiper *Xenus cinereus*. Seen in the Seychelles.

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*. Seen in the Seychelles.

Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*. Seen in the Seychelles.

Sanderling *Calidris alba*. Seen in the Seychelles.

Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea*. Seen in the Seychelles.

Family Laridae - Gulls, Terns and Skimmers

Brown Noddy *Anous stolidus*. Impressive numbers seen throughout the region (*pileatus*), but our best views were on Aride and Cousine Islands in the Seychelles where they were breeding and could be compared side-by-side with Lesser Noddy.

Lesser Noddy *Anous tenuirostris*. Impressive numbers seen throughout the region (*tenuirostris*) and generally more numerous than Brown Noddy. Our best views were on Aride and Cousine Islands in the Seychelles where they could be compared side-by-side with Brown Noddy.

White Tern *Gygis alba*. Brilliant views of these birds in the Seychelles, especially on Cousine and Aride Islands where they were nesting (*candida*).

Gull-billed Tern *Gelochelidon nilotica*. One was seen during our second wader watch on Mahé Island in the Seychelles, where it is a vagrant.

Greater Crested Tern *Thalasseus bergii*. A couple were seen in the Seychelles (*thalassinus*).

Saunders's Tern *Sternula saundersi*. Seen well on Mahé Island in the Seychelles.

Bridled Tern *Onychoprion anaethetus*. Seen a few times, but our best views were on Aride Island in the Seychelles (*antarcticus*).

Sooty Tern *Onychoprion fuscatus*. Large numbers were seen at Arid Island in the Seychelles and during the Round Island pelagic (*nubilosus*).

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*. One was seen along the shore of Praslin Island in the Seychelles.

White-winged Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus*. One was seen on Mahé Island in the Seychelles.

Family Stercorariidae - Skuas

Brown Skua *Stercorarius antarcticus*. One was seen on the pelagic trip off Réunion.

Family Columbidae - Pigeons, Doves

Feral Pigeon *Columba livia*. Seen.

Madagascar Turtle Dove (Malagasy Turtle Dove) *Nesoenas picturatus*. Seen throughout the islands. On Mahé Island in the Seychelles they looked like the introduced form from Madagascar (*picturatus*), whereas on Aride Island they appeared to be intermediate between *picturatus* and **rostrata*, and on Cousine Island they seemed to be very close to pure **rostrata*, but are probably not genetically pure. Madagascan birds were also seen on Mauritius, Rodrigues and Réunion.

Spotted Dove *Spilopelia chinensis*. Introduced. Seen on Mauritius.

***Pink Pigeon** *Nesoenas mayeri*. Seen in good numbers on Mauritius, including at Pigeon Wood where the last remaining wild birds were found and no captive-bred birds have been released. Also seen on Ile aux Aigrettes. Voted number four on bird-of-the-trip contest.

Zebra Dove *Geopelia striata*. Introduced. Seen throughout the islands.

***Seychelles Blue Pigeon** *Alectroenas pulcherrimus*. Several great sightings in the Seychelles, especially on Mahé and Praslin.

Family Strigidae - Owls

***Seychelles Scops Owl** *Otus insularis*. Seen well on two consecutive nights in the highlands of Mahé Island in the Seychelles.

Family Apodidae - Swifts

***Seychelles Swiftlet** *Aerodramus elaphrus*. Seen well in the Seychelles on both Mahé and Praslin Islands.

***Mascarene Swiftlet** *Aerodramus francicus*. First seen around Black River Gorges on Mauritius, but there were more and the views were better in the highlands of Réunion.

Family Falconidae - Falcons

***Mauritius Kestrel** *Falco punctatus*. Superb views of a pair birds at Vallée de Ferney on Mauritius. All birds are thought to be derived from a single female that was taken into captivity, even though there was still one wild but infertile female when the population was at its lowest of four birds.

***Seychelles Kestrel** *Falco araeus*. First seen dust bathing in the evening in the highlands of Mahé Island in Seychelles, then seen on a night roost and again during the day on some scaffolding near the coast. Michael also saw one on Praslin Island, where it was reintroduced. Voted number three in the bird-of-the-trip contest.

Family Psittaculidae - Old World Parrots

***Seychelles Black Parrot** *Coracopsis [nigra] barklyi*. Seen very well at Vallée de Mai on Praslin Island in the Seychelles, both in flight and perched.

Rose-ringed Parakeet *Psittacula krameri*. Introduced. Seen on Mauritius.

***Echo Parakeet** *Psittacula eques*. Prolonged and excellent views of several females in Macchabée Forest in the highlands of Mauritius, and one lovely male.

Family Campephagidae - Cuckooshrikes

***Mauritius Cuckooshrike** *Coracina typica*. Three good sightings in Macchabée Forest on Mauritius; were the females all on eggs?

***Reunion Cuckooshrike** *Coracina newtoni*. Superb views of a single male in the highlands of Réunion, and at least two other birds were heard.

Family Monarchidae - Monarchs

***Seychelles Paradise Flycatcher** *Terpsiphone corvina*. Richard spotted the first pair before we even arrived at Le Veuve Reserve on La Digue Island in the Seychelles, where we enjoyed several more males and females. Voted number 2 in the bird of the trip contest.

***Mascarene Paradise Flycatcher** *Terpsiphone bourbonensis*. A pair was seen very well near the Black River Gorges on Mauritius (*desolata*), and several were seen at close range in the highlands of Réunion (*bourbonensis*).

Family Corvidae - Crows, Jays

House Crow *Corvus splendens*. Introduced. Seen on Mauritius.

Family Pycnonotidae - Bulbuls

***Seychelles Bulbul** *Hypsipetes crassirostris*. Seen well in the Seychelles, especially on Mahé and Praslin Islands.

***Reunion Bulbul** *Hypsipetes borbonicus*. Seen well in the highlands of Réunion.

***Mauritius Bulbul** *Hypsipetes [borbonicus] olivaceus*. Several were seen in the Black River Gorges of Mauritius.

Red-whiskered Bulbul *Pycnonotus jocosus*. Introduced. Seen on Mauritius and Réunion.

Family Hirundinidae - Swallows, Martins

Mascarene Martin *Phedina borbonica*. We enjoyed very good views of perched birds both on Mauritius and Réunion (**borbonica*).

Family Acrocephalidae - Reed Warblers and allies

***Seychelles Warbler** *Acrocephalus sechellensis*. First seen on Cousine Island in Seychelles, where there were always some visitors from neighbouring Cousin but the population was boosted with reintroductions. Also seen on Aride Island, where reintroduced.

***Rodrigues Warbler** *Acrocephalus rodericanus*. Seen in impressive numbers at Solitude and Grande Montagne on Rodrigues.

Family Zosteropidae - White-eyes

***Reunion Grey White-eye** *Zosterops borbonicus*. Seen in good numbers on Réunion.

***Mauritius Grey White-eye** *Zosterops [borbonicus] mauritanus*. Seen in good numbers in the highlands of Mauritius.

***Seychelles White-eye** *Zosterops modestus*. A pair of birds was seen at very close range on central Mahé Island in the Seychelles, on two occasions.

***Reunion Olive White-eye** *Zosterops olivaceus*. Seen in good numbers on Réunion.

***Mauritius Olive White-eye** *Zosterops chloronothos*. First one was seen in the highlands of Mauritius, followed by several on Ile aux Aigrettes, where reintroduced.

Family Sturnidae - Starlings, Rhabdornis

Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis*. Introduced. Seen throughout the islands.

Family Muscipidae - Chats, Old World Flycatchers

***Seychelles Magpie-Robin** *Copsychus sechellarum*. We enjoyed close-up views of at least ten birds on Cousine and Aride Islands in the Seychelles, where they were reintroduced. The last wild birds, which are the source for all reintroductions, are found on Frégate Island, which is privately owned and costs more than 3000 Euros a night to visit!

***Reunion Stonechat** *Saxicola [torquatus] tectes*. Seen in good numbers in the highlands of Réunion.

Family Nectariniidae - Sunbirds

***Seychelles Sunbird** *Cinnyris dussumieri*. Seen well in the Seychelles, especially on Mahé Island.

Family Passeridae - Old World Sparrows, Snowfinches

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*. Introduced. Seen throughout the islands

Family Ploceidae - Weavers, Widowbirds

Spotted-backed Weaver (Village Weaver) *Ploceus [cucullatus] collaris*. Introduced. Seen on Mauritius.

Madagascar Fody (Red Fody) *Foudia madagascariensis*. Introduced. Seen throughout the islands

Mauritius Fody *Foudia rubra*. We enjoyed good views of several males in the Black River Gorges and on Ile au Aigrettes (where reintroduced).

Seychelles Fody *Foudia sechellarum*. Good numbers were seen on Cousine and Aride Islands in the Seychelles.

Rodrigues Fody *Foudia flavicans*. We had excellent views of several bright males at Solitude and Grande Montagne on Rodrigues. Voted tie fourth on bird-of-the-trip contest.

Family Estrildidae - Waxbills, Munias and allies

Common Waxbill *Estrilda astrild*. Introduced. Seen on Seychelles, Mauritius and Réunion.

Family Fringillidae - Finches

Yellow-fronted Canary *Crithagra mozambica*. Introduced. Seen on Mauritius.

Family Motacillidae - Wagtails, Pipits

Western Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava*. One was seen on Aride Island in the Seychelles, where it is a vagrant.



Seychelles Swiftlet



Mauritius Fody



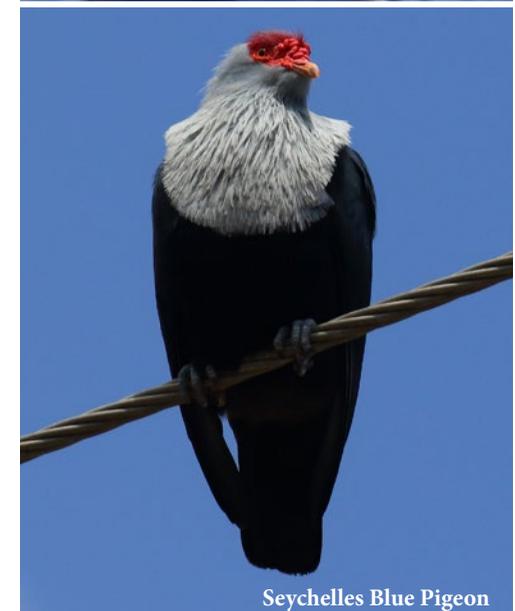
White-tailed Tropicbird



Tropical Shearwater



Round Island Petrel



Seychelles Blue Pigeon