



This short trip report summarises finding some of the key birds on the Indian Ocean island of Mauritius, based on visits made in June 2011 and June 2013. During the latter visit, I was joined by Simon Lloyd. Both of these were working trips, so birding was mainly tacked on as a sideline on one or two free days on each visit, plus the odd afternoon or early morning here or there as time allowed. Both trips were based in Grand Baie, a popular tourist centre in the north of the island and a 1.5 hour drive from the airport, via the island capital of Port Louis. Despite clearly being an overall ecological catastrophe (3% of its original forest cover remains) Mauritius is still quite a nice island to visit, although, at least in my opinion, the Seychelles it is not. The birding is relaxed and most of the species of interest can be seen with a day or two of effort, even though most are far from numerous.

Weather and what to bring

June is winter in Mauritius and, given that the south-easterly trades are generally blowing by then, it can be quite breezy and changeable. It is best to expect rain, maybe for a whole day or two out of a week or fortnight's trip. If it is not raining, it is generally pleasant and certainly not suffocatingly hot, although the exposed east coast can be cool when breezy. A telescope is a good idea if you want to make sure you see at least a few seabirds and the field guide to use is the adequate, if hardly inspirational, *Birds of the Indian Ocean Islands* by Sinclair and Langrand. I guess if you are lucky enough to see a monster *Pterodroma*, you won't care too much about the rubbish illustrations of them in the book. To get a witty, damning, and, sometimes inspirational insight into conservation on Mauritius (or, least, the story up until the late 1980s), you should try *Last Chance to See*, a wonderfully written travelogue by Douglas Adams in which Mauritius features as a chapter. As you will probably have plenty of time on the beach to read, you could also try *Dodo – The Bird Behind the Legend* by Alan Grihault; available at the airport bookshop as of June 2013. BirdLife factsheets, available at <http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/home> are a good source of conservation data on many key species.

Accommodation and getting around

There are luxurious hotels all over Mauritius and a lot of visitors stay on the south-west and south-east coasts. This is a good idea, as you are then fairly close to most of the key sites, as the little remaining native forest is in this part of the island. On both my visits, I stayed at Grand Baie at the opposite end of the island; Les Orchidees Hotel (<http://www.lesorchideeshotelmauritius.com/>) is a good, friendly and reasonably priced option here. It is

also easy and inexpensive to rent a car in Grand Baie; I have used <http://www.monalysatours.net/> both years, but there are plenty of other operators.

Birding notes and sites

What follows is arranged rather haphazardly, but as I best see fit! See map at bottom for more location data.

1 Mauritius Grey White-eye and Mascarene Swiftlet

First, the good news; you don't need to worry about either of these. They really are common over most of the island and you will generally bump into them without much effort. The white-eye, like Mauritius Olive White-eye, actually, is **not** another boring *Zosterops*; it exudes character and should keep you well entertained. Which is fortunate as you will have to hunt through an awful lot of greys as you try to find an olive...

2 Black River Gorges: trying for (most of) the endemics

This, the main (only?) remaining significant area of upland and hill



forest, is best accessed from Le Petrin; see map below. As long as you can navigate to there (not too easy in my experience if you are coming from the north), the driving time from Grand Baie is little over an hour. Getting to Le Petrin from the south or



south east should be much easier. From the (generally unmanned) visitor centre here you can walk the main (Macchabe) trail westwards through good forest, all the way to a fine viewpoint. I had **Mauritius Bulbul** on this trail on two visits out of two, seeing a pair each time.

Echo Parakeet is also obvious here and, after a few flyovers, you should get a couple perched up. **Mauritius Cuckooshrike** turned up in 2011 (but not 2013) and **Pink Pigeon** may be found in natural looking surroundings (once in 2011). Failing that, there are now (as of 2013) release cages for this species at Le Petrin. **White-tailed Tropicbird** is also present in the gorge and may, if you are lucky, give great views sailing over the gorge.

Other trails in the Le Petrin area:

There is a whole network of other trails in this area too, including ones leading ultimately down to the coast. In 2013, we tried the trail that leads to a waterfall (on the left not long after you start the Macchabe trail; signpost had fallen down!). This gets you into pretty good forest, and I eventually saw three **Mauritius Bultuls** very closely and, even better, right alongside, **Mauritius Fody**. This is quite a tough call from the ubiquitous **Madagascar Fody** in non-breeding plumage but habitat, rather pointed (peculiarly Chaffinch-like, as far as I could judge) bill and, especially, rather distinctive sunbird-like call (a deliberate, repeated *zip-zip-zip...*, rather harder and more definite than anything I have heard uttered from the commoner species) are good pointers.

In 2011 (but not in 2013, as the weather was very poor) I tried the Savanne Trail, accessed by driving several km south from Le Petrin; trail runs eastward, so look for the lay-by on the left. The roadside forest here and around the crater lake is apparently a spot to try for **Mauritius Fody**; on the trail itself, I found two pairs of **Mauritius Olive White-eyes** not too far in off the road; the first pair were loosely associating with a gang of **Mauritius Grey White-eyes** but the second pair were located by chance on the forest edge. **Pink Pigeons** release cages were in use, at least in 2011, on the right hand side a bit further on.

3 Mascarene Martin

The only place I have seen this species (I guess it must occur somewhere else on the island too, however) is around the terribly tacky Grand Bassin temple; this is a few km east of Le Petrin and marked on all maps. The birds seem peculiarly attracted to this trite spot; I had 25+, giving exceptional views in 2011 (and one in 2013, despite a thunderstorm).

4 Ile aux Aigrettes (<http://www.ile-aux-aigrettes.com/>)

This is the Mauritian equivalent of Tiri-Tiri Matangi (New Zealand) and is a short hop from the Mahebourg / Blue Bay area in the south-east of the island. I have never had the chance to visit here, but **Olive White-eye**, **Mauritius Fody** and **Pink Pigeon** are all, apparently, guaranteed. The walk and chance to learn about Mauritius' endemic plants and extinctions in the past also sounds interesting. Visiting supports the work of Mauritian Wildlife Foundation and most tour operators and hotels can apparently take visits for bookings.

5 Mauritius Paradise-Flycatcher at Bras d'Eau

This endemic (if you split the Mauritius form from those on Reunion) is best looked for at Bras d'Eau, a national park in the north-east of the island. It apparently occurs in the lower reaches of Black River Gorges, but I have never heard of anybody seeing it there. At Bras d'Eau, there is a small visitor centre on the roadside; from here you can walk into the forest. On three occasions (once in 2011 and twice in 2013) I have found this attractive species within 30 minutes of looking within a few hundred metres of the entrance; in 2013 it was present near the walled *Arucaria* plantation (look for the sign). Bras d'Eau has lots of **Mauritius Grey White-eyes**, and the coastal lagoons will probably yield a few waders in the northern winter. It can easily be combined with a visit to Roches Noir and Pointe Lafayette, which are nearby.

6 Mauritius Kestrel

This is another tricky endemic that, although it does occur at Black River Gorges (and is apparently sometimes seen along the Macchabe trail), cannot be relied on there. It is better to try some of the private, lowland reserves in the south-east; Vallee de Ferney is one option and in 2013, we tried the aptly named Kestrel Valley, a bit further north along the coast road. See http://www.mauritius-islander.com/kestrel_valley_mauritius.htm for some basic information. This site is prominently signposted from the main road but was 'closed for renovation' in June 2013. Undaunted, we followed the track for several km inland to the reserve's (closed) gate and scoped the hills from there, pretty easily locating two **Mauritius Kestrels** zipping about over the large peak a little right of centre; problem was that they were not close; a scope was essential to get even average views. **White-tailed Tropicbirds** are obvious here and there also were several **Mauritius Fruit-Bats**, flying about even at mid-day (but, like the kestrels, distant)

7 Real Seawatching

This is an art that, despite extensive practice in north-west Ireland and eastern Oman, I have not really cracked in Mauritius yet. If you plan and your strategy and have lots of time, it **is** possible to enjoy some good seabirding from land; for example, take a look at [http://www.camacdonald.com/birding/africamauritius&reunion\(hottalatripreport\).htm](http://www.camacdonald.com/birding/africamauritius&reunion(hottalatripreport).htm) for an interesting trip report as to how to go about it. I have tried the east coast sites of Roches Noir and Pointe Lafayette several times now, in seemingly perfect conditions, to little effect. In 2011 I also put an hour in at Le Roche que Pleure (Le Gris Gris) on the south coast to the tune of a few distant **terns** and one **Wedge-tailed Shearwater**. There was, however, a couple of **Humpbacked Whales** close inshore and they more than made up for the lack of birds.

8 Easy Seawatching

If you want to see at least some seabirds, regardless of weather, take a scope to the north of Mauritius and scan out over the impressive Gunner's Quoin island. It is possible to watch from the small rocky point north of the beach at Perybere, about 3km north of Grand Baie, or at Cape Malheureux, a few km further north – look for the scenic, red-roofed church squeezed between the main road and an idyllic, curving and generally empty beach. Gunner's Quoin is full of breeding **tropicbirds** (mainly **Red-tailed**; many fewer **White-tailed**) which appear to be most numerous (hundreds) during the middle of the day. Passing **terns** (mainly **Sooty**) and **noddies** (mainly **Brown**) are also obvious and there are often a few **Masked Boobies** fishing offshore. This has got to be the place to try and find Red-footed Booby. In both 2011 and 2013 I noted *Catharacta* skuas from here, presumably **Subantarctic Skuas**. The problem is, like everywhere in Mauritius, that the seabirds are well distant, so be prepared to put the time in to get some sort of views. The alternative would be to try a catamaran trip out of Grand Baie; these apparently go everyday and should give good views of the tropicbirds and terns. Round Island, and its breeding *Petrodromas*, looms much further out to the north-east and, at least in June is generally surrounded by very rough seas. I have not investigated getting a boat out here, but it might be viable for a group to try and charter a boat from Grand Baie.

