

# Birding within 100km of Manila, the Philippines

12<sup>th</sup> to 28<sup>th</sup> August 2014

Steve Anyon-Smith



## The Plan

Mayette, my wife, was visiting the Philippines for some dental work and implored me to join her. I did so on the basis that we could go to some birding sites within a “couple of hours drive” from Manila. First time visitors to Manila should be aware that “a couple of hours drive” might mean that you are still in Manila, very close to where you started, depending on the time of day you leave. Anyway.

Mayette’s brother Bebot offered to drive us wherever we wanted to go and to provide transport at each site.

I first visited the Philippines in 1993 on my first holiday ex-Australia. Since then 34 million extra Filipinos have somehow managed to squeeze into an already crowded country, bringing the current population to 100 million. Paradoxically extreme poverty seems to have fallen. Other changes include:

- Many more private vehicles, meaning that the abysmal traffic conditions in Manila and elsewhere have become worse by degrees;
- Much improved food;
- Fewer people calling me “Joe”;

- Less overt hunting of birds by small boys and others;
- Mayette has so many more family members that it is now impossible to meet them all in any one city; and
- Churches, and religious icons in homes, have become larger and shinier.

After I booked my air tickets various wise folk asked me why I was going to the Philippines in the middle of the monsoon season. Bugger; I forgot.



My travel companions – Mayette, her brother Bebot and wife Gemma

### Sites Visited

We explored three areas reasonably well along with two sites fairly briefly (see maps):

- Subic Bay area, to the northwest of Manila, four nights,
- Mt Makiling, to the south, three nights,
- Ternate / Mt Palay-Palay, to the southwest, two nights,
- La Mesa Eco-Park, in Quezon City (part of Manila), two part days, and
- Mt Tarangka, in the Southern Sierra Madre Mountains, east of Manila, for a few hours only.

At Subic Bay we stayed at Camayan Beach Resort. This place is rather wonderful. The rainforest comes through the grounds and into the sea, the rooms are great, there is 24

hour restaurant service, the seawater is quite clean and swimmable (with a lifeguard!) and there are lots of birds within walking distance. Couldn't ask for more. Room rates are ~\$US100 twin / double including breakfast. I could go back here – even though I've seen almost all the birds.

If you catch a bus from Manila, the resort runs a free shuttle bus from downtown Subic Bay.



Mt Makiling continues to frustrate me. In 1993 I failed to get into the forest. This time round the road / trail to the summit was closed due to the recent visit of Typhoon Glenda.

The recommended Trees Hostel, which has private rooms, and is adjacent to the start of the primary forest, was fully booked. We couldn't get consecutive nights at the privately owned SEARCA Hotel, which is also within the grounds of the University of the Philippines Los Banos. We had more luck with the University's Continuing Education Centre (CEC) Hotel. The rooms were fine - clean and cheap and with air con. They cost less than \$US30 twin. Food could be bought at various student-grade eateries nearby or else you can leave the campus and go to the adjacent town.

There is plenty of public transport to Laguna from Manila. You could get by without a car if you stayed on campus.





I had received conflicting reports of the likelihood of seeing any good birds at Ternate / Mt Palay-Palay. We went anyway, the alternative being staying in Manila, which is no alternative at all.

The area is bird heaven (corrected for the Philippines). Our preferred accommodation, the Calaybne Bay Resort, was closed for renovations. The back-up was Puerto Azul Resort. These guys admitted that most of their rooms had been squashed by a typhoon. They generously said we could squeeze into a smaller room for the same price. I don't think so. Ternate Beach Resort didn't answer their phone(s).

We probably picked what we initially thought was the worst option in Ranrich Beach Resort, a place near the middle of Ternate. Our first impressions weren't great. However we soon found ourselves their only customers with the choice of three swimming pools! The rooms are fair (bring your own bog rolls...) and cost \$US75 for up to eight (!) people.

Public transport could get you to Ternate from Manila or from the vicinity of Mt Makiling. There are plenty of cheap tricycles for hire to the birding sites once you get there.



## **Weather**

Our time in the Philippines coincided with the middle of the monsoon season. Remarkably I lost just a few hours birding to rain out of almost three weeks, and these few hours were on the last day. It rained much more at home in Sydney (which was also good news). It was generally partly cloudy, very warm (30-33 degrees) and quite humid. I didn't find it too enervating but others may enjoy a different view. Getting out of a seemingly never-ending Sydney winter helped.

## **Transport**

All our travel was by private vehicle with local drivers. The 'local drivers' bit is important. Driving in the Philippines is not recommended unless you were born there. Thanks go to brothers-in-law Bebot and Rody and also my niece's husband Don. To Bebot for driving so well and so far, Rody for the entertainment on the North Luzon Expressway and Don for taking me to La Mesa. Mayette's nephew Othello chipped in with transport within Manila.

Manila sets world's worst practice in road design. Traffic congestion ranges from abysmal (during the middle of the night or on a public holiday) to a level beyond the ability of the English language to describe at other times. Outside of Manila it isn't quite as bad. Sometimes you might enjoy a relatively fast motorway. That is until you queue to pay the tolls, and there are plenty of these....

## **Philippine People**

Filipinos are pretty relaxed – even when driving. Nobody gets too upset about anything. And unlike some Asian countries, the locals are rarely annoying. When they offer a service or goods, if your answer is 'no' they don't generally ask again (or maybe it's just me?). They are a fatalistic bunch. Whatever happens, happens.

The planning horizon for most Filipinos is about an hour. If you are on an outing with a Filipino or intending to go on one, it pays to reconfirm – several times. I speak on behalf of others here – not my recent experience with family members.... (okay, sometimes).

The vast majority of Filipinos are Christians. Religion is critically important to them, but they don't seem to care too much if you don't share their views.

Outside of fancy restaurants in Manila and at Camayan Beach Resort I saw no other foreigners at all. Despite this, most of the local people I came across barely made eye contact, and those that did were pleasant and welcoming.

Pay rates for those in service industries, like restaurants and hotels are very low; sometimes as little as 300 pesos (\$US7) per day in the provinces and 400 pesos in Manila. And these are people in full-time employment. There are probably millions in Manila alone who aren't this lucky. A few dollars here and there for good service can make a lot of people happy.

Interestingly there has been a marked change in the attitude of Filipinos to “birdwatching”. Whereas in 1993 people thought I was nuts, now they think I’m nuts but want to know why. All jokes aside, many of them are keen to learn more about their birdlife and are surprised to know that so many different ones still exist.

## **Food**

Full marks to the Philippines for the improvement to their food since 1993. I failed to find any rocks in the rice this time round. The pork ceased to be 80% fat. Vegetables were sighted. Best of all, standards of hygiene have improved to the point that it was difficult to get crook guts. I enjoyed meal times. The food is inexpensive by Australian standards, except at the better restaurants in Manila where prices are similar.



## **Personal security**

There is no reason not to go to the areas surrounding Manila on safety and security grounds. Normal travel rules apply. Most of the people you will meet are super-friendly and chatty and they have all the time in the world.

## **Birds**

The number of birds recorded in the Manila Region would be somewhere in the 300's I guess. This figure reduces, like it does everywhere else, if migrants are not present. These



were just starting to return by the end of my visit. Few birds are really common and most of these live in human-altered habitats.

Most of the original forest in the Philippines was rainforest of one type or another. Most of this is gone, probably forever. Nevertheless there is still good forest in the Manila Region and there are lots of good birds in it.

A hunting culture has always existed in the Philippines, probably made degrees worse by the American colonists and their gun culture, so the birds are not happy to see you like they are in some parts of Africa, North America and Australia. Philippine forests give up their secrets slowly, but this can be a good thing. You are never going to see all the possible birds, not even all of the relatively common ones, on the first day in the field.

Aside from at Mt Makiling, I had no birding guide. I learnt the calls as I went along. I had the field guide (*Kennedy et al*) and "tapes". The tapes were next to useless with a grand total of one bird – a white-browed shama – responded to its call to the point where I could see it. 133 species were seen. I was very happy with this. 56 were lifers. Some of the seen birds, like the pittas, crakes and Luzon bleeding-heart doves are notoriously difficult to see if you are with others, or in the case of the dove, at all. Alone, occasionally bare-footed, quiet and sneaky gives you some sort of a chance.....

It's great to see that birding as a past-time is alive and well in the Philippines. Well done to the Wild Bird Club of the Philippines! - <http://www.birdwatch.ph/index.html>

## Other Wildlife

Mammals are really tough, with a few exceptions. Long-tailed macaques are common in the Subic Bay area. A few were also seen on the Pico de Loro Trail, Mt Palay-Palay "National Park". Golden-crowned and giant flying-foxes are easy to see opposite Subic Airport. (*See if*



*you can spot the golden-crowned in the photo...).* A lone giant flying fox was also seen in the grounds of Ranrich Beach Resort.

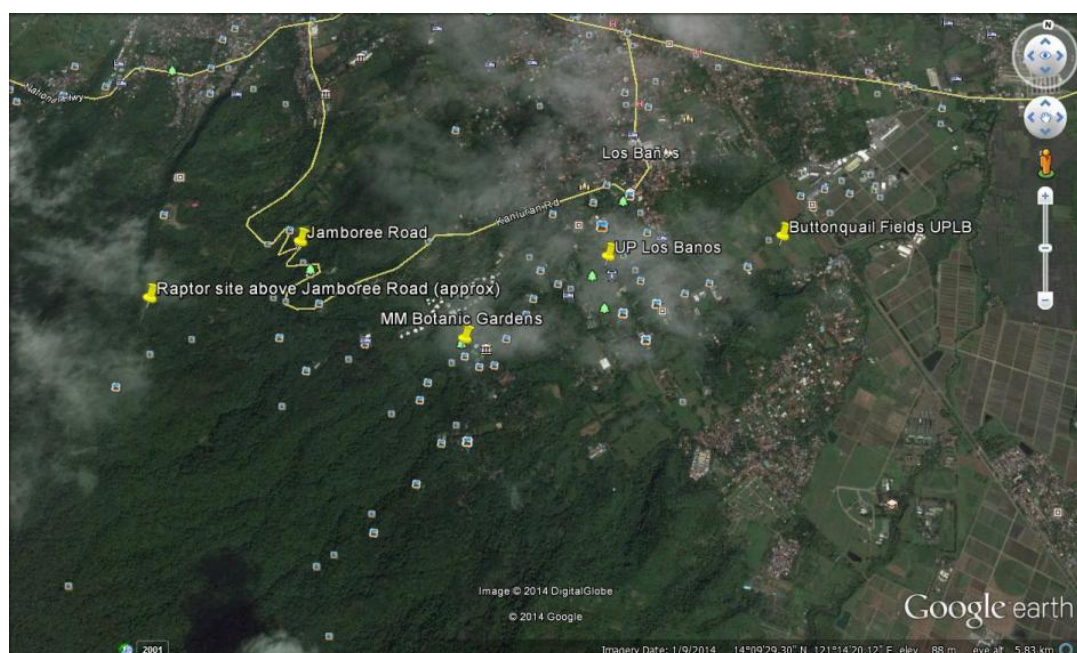
Microbats abound. I have no idea what they were. Some very large insectivorous bats with very strong eye-shine were seen in the grounds of the

university at Mt Makiling.

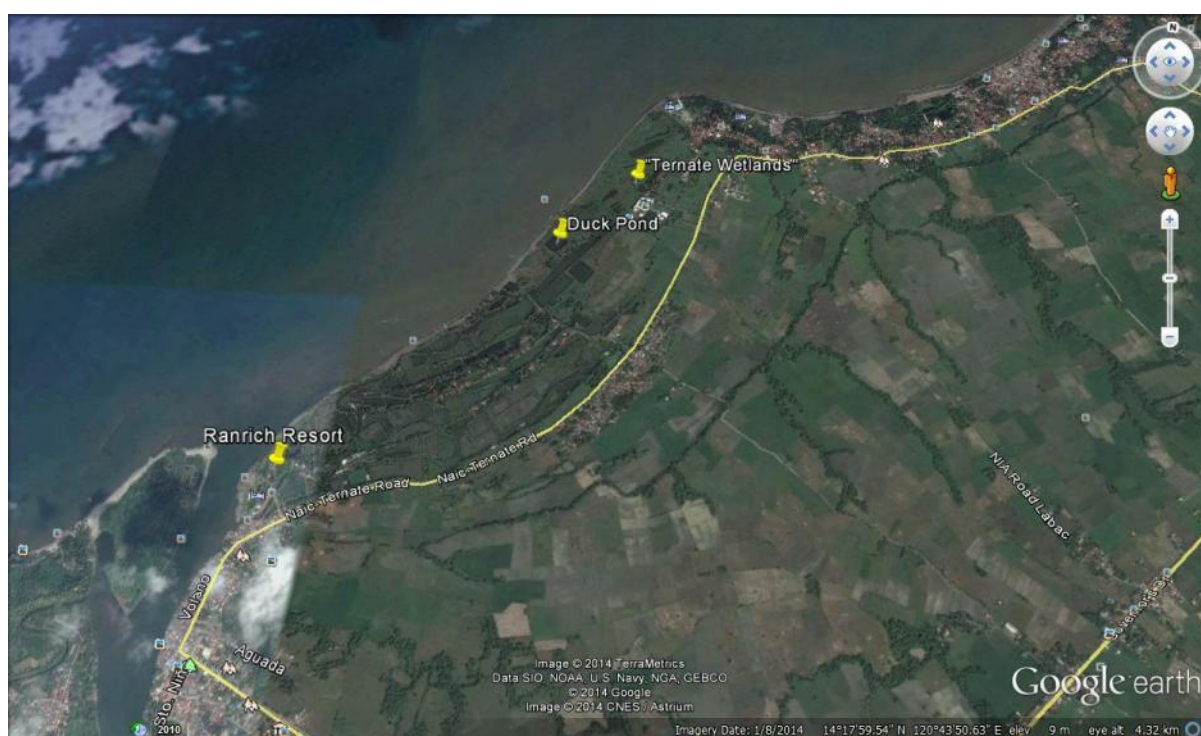
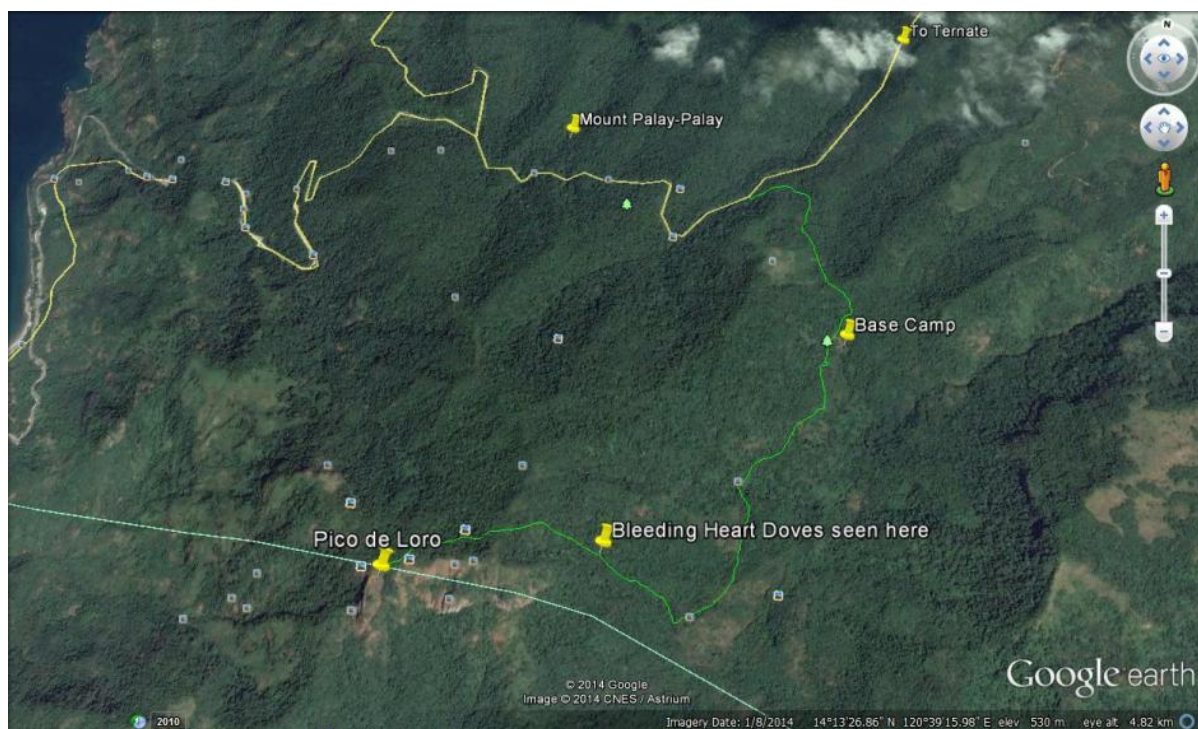
There are still lots of reptiles, mostly skinks, as well as some dragons and monitors. Most of these are hunted. For some of them I have no idea why.

On the plus side, I saw far fewer bird hunters in and around the sites we visited than in 1993, with none at all at Subic. Many of the birds seen in roadside fields were simply not there twenty years earlier. I read in the Manila daily paper that a tree planting world record attempt was to be made in Mindanao – something like 4.6 million trees in a day. So there is some good news about the place!

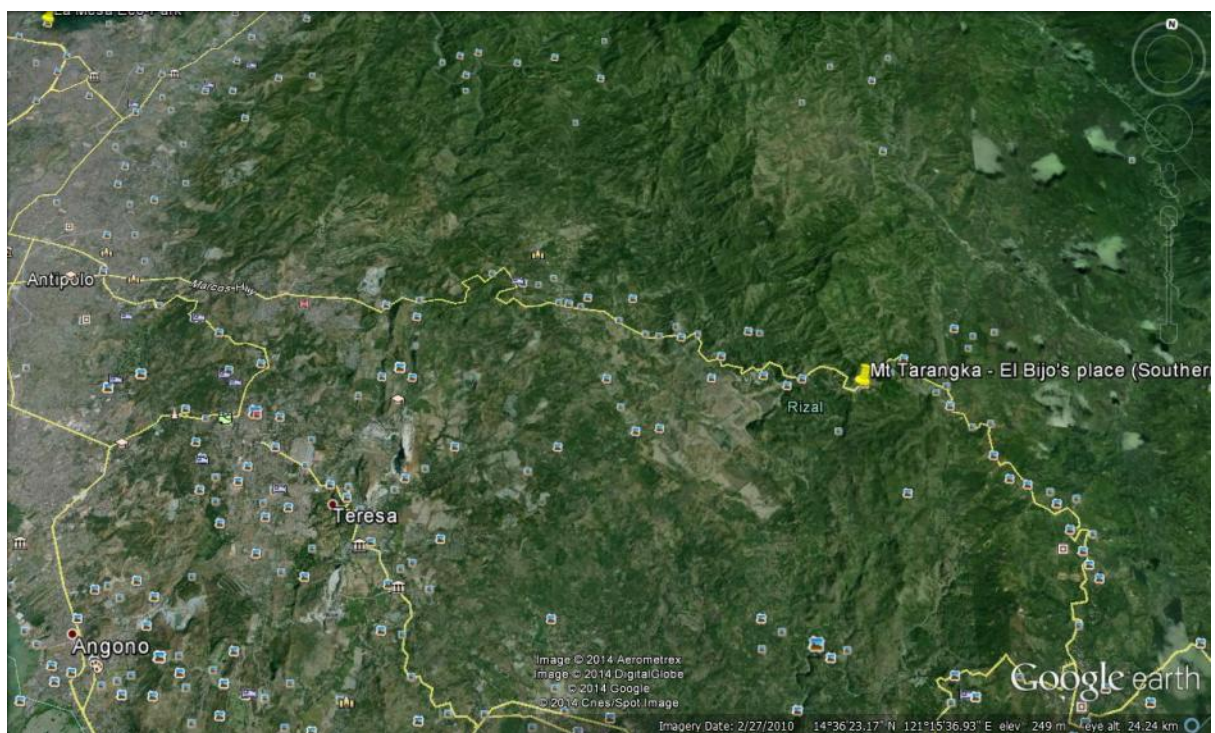
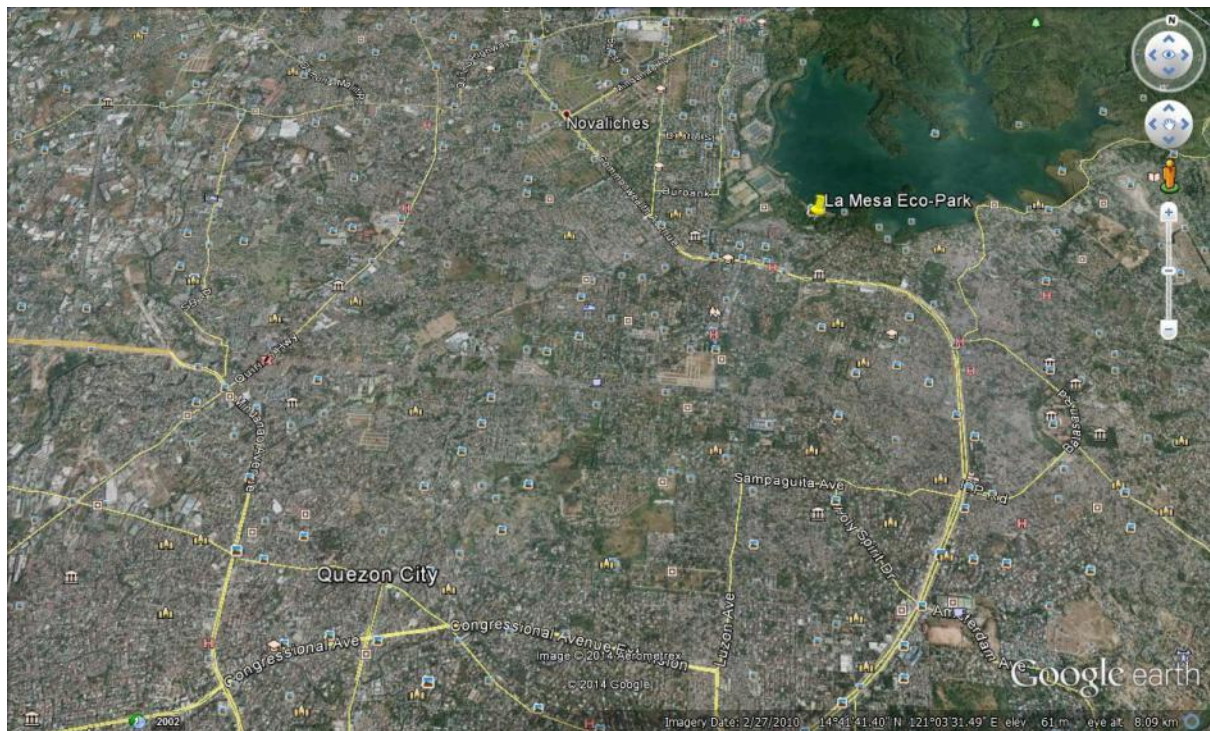
Site maps from Google Earth (obviously):











**List of Birds Seen and Notes** (see also site notes at end of table)

	<b>Bird</b>	<b>Notes</b>
1	<b>Lesser Frigatebird</b>	One seen overflying forest on STT
2	<b>Purple Heron</b>	A couple seen from NLEX and one at TW
3	<b>Great Egret*</b>	Common in ricefields
4	<b>Intermediate Egret*</b>	In ricefields
5	<b>Little Egret*</b>	In flocks at TW and in ricefields elsewhere
6	<b>Striated Heron</b>	Occasional along seacoasts
7	<b>Rufous Night-Heron</b>	One overflying Ranrich Beach Resort, Ternate
8	<b>Black-crowned Night-Heron</b>	Common in flight early AM/late PM. VC at TW
9	<b>Yellow Bittern</b>	Three seen at TW
10	<b>Cinnamon Bittern</b>	Common at TW and surrounds
11	<b>Black Bittern</b>	Three seen at TW in five minutes
12	<b>Philippine Duck</b>	One seen in flight at TW. Apparently regular here.
13	<b>Oriental Honey-buzzard</b>	One seen above Jamboree Road, MM
14	<b>Brahminy Kite</b>	Common over coastal bays or nearby forest
15	<b>Besra</b>	One seen on the STT
16	<b>Philippine Serpent-Eagle</b>	Several at Subic sites and a few at MM
17	<b>Philippine Hawk-Eagle</b>	One seen from ridge above Jamboree Rd, MM
18	<b>Rufous-bellied Eagle</b>	One seen very well perched at MMBG (photographed)
19	<b>Red Junglefowl</b>	Seen at MMBG and PdL Trail
20	<b>Philippine Falconet</b>	Two at OBR and two at MMBG
21	<b>Peregrine Falcon</b>	One at TW and another at Taal Volcano lookout
22	<b>Spotted Buttonquail</b>	A male seen at STT
23	<b>Barred Buttonquail</b>	Three seen at UPLB
24	<b>Slaty-legged Crake</b>	One seen on PdL Trail near the base camp
25	<b>Barred Rail</b>	Two at OBR and two at LaM
26	<b>Plain Bush-hen</b>	Three seen from Jamboree Rd, MM
27	<b>White-breasted Waterhen</b>	One on creek in UPLB, two at TW
28	<b>Ruddy-breasted Crake</b>	One seen in field with rank grass at Ternate
29	<b>White-browed Crake</b>	Adult + juvenile seen at TW
30	<b>Common Sandpiper</b>	Flock in muddy field from NLEX, two at Ternate
31	<b>Swinhoe's Snipe</b>	One flushed - seen and heard at TW. Early return.
32	<b>Oriental Pratincole</b>	A few seen in flight from Subic-Clark Expressway
33	<b>Pied Stilt</b>	Two flocks seen in muddy fields from NLEX
34	<b>Black-naped Tern</b>	Three seen at the mouth of Subic Bay
35	<b>White-eared Dove</b>	Common at all Subic sites; less so elsewhere
36	<b>Pink-necked Pigeon</b>	Male seen at grassy field on STT
37	<b>Philippine Green-Pigeon</b>	Common on OBR; less so elsewhere at Subic
38	<b>Green Imperial-Pigeon</b>	Common at the Subic sites
39	<b>Rock Pigeon*</b>	Common
40	<b>Philippine Collared-Dove</b>	Dozens perched on the seaward side of TW
41	<b>Red Collared-Dove</b>	A few seen on powerlines from NLEX
42	<b>Spotted Dove*</b>	Common



43	<b>Philippine Cuckoo-Dove</b>	One seen on PdL Trail near the base camp
44	<b>Emerald Dove</b>	Seen on STT, LaM and PdL Trail in small numbers
45	<b>Zebra Dove*</b>	Common
46	<b>Luzon Bleeding-heart</b>	Two seen, one extremely well, on upper PdL Trail
47	<b>Guaibero</b>	Common in Subic area; less so elsewhere
48	<b>Blue-naped Parrot</b>	Close views of two on IFW Road, and two on Aeta Trail
49	<b>Green Racquet-tail</b>	Common at Subic sites; especially OBR
50	<b>Philippine Hanging-Parrot</b>	Common at MM; less so elsewhere
51	<b>Philippine Hawk-Cuckoo</b>	One seen perched at LaM; another? (distantly) at SSM
52	<b>Chestnut-winged Cuckoo</b>	Brilliant views on PdL Trail near base camp. Early return
53	<b>Philippine Drongo-Cuckoo</b>	One seen well at SSM
54	<b>Red-crested Malkoha</b>	Very common at Subic sites. Common MM and PP
55	<b>Scale-feathered Malkoha</b>	A couple at MMBG and one on PdL Trail
56	<b>Rufous Coucal</b>	Fairly common at the Subic sites
57	<b>Philippine Coucal</b>	Common at the Subic sites; less so elsewhere
58	<b>Lesser Coucal</b>	One at TW
59	<b>Philippine Scops-Owl</b>	Quite common in UPLB
60	<b>Luzon Boobook</b>	Two seen in UPLB
61	<b>Philippine Nightjar</b>	Two seen well in flight and on the ground on STT
62	<b>Glossy Swiftlet</b>	Common
63	<b>Uniform Swiftlet*</b>	Camayan Beach Resort
64	<b>Purple Needletail</b>	One along creek in UPLB
65	<b>House Swift*</b>	Common
66	<b>Philippine Trogon</b>	Four seen on PdL Trail; two on ascent, two on descent
67	<b>Common Kingfisher</b>	One on fish farm at Ternate
68	<b>Indigo-banded Kingfisher</b>	Fairly easy to see in UPLB and MMBG
69	<b>Dollarbird</b>	Single birds at OBR, UPLB and NLEX
70	<b>Ruddy Kingfisher</b>	Two noisy birds seen on lower section of OBR
71	<b>Brown-breasted Kingfisher</b>	Seen on IFW Road, UPLB, MMBG and PP
72	<b>Collared Kingfisher</b>	Common
73	<b>Spotted Kingfisher</b>	One eventually seen in MMBG. Bastard of a thing.
74	<b>Blue-tailed Bee-eater</b>	Seen from NLEX and at TW
75	<b>Luzon Hornbill</b>	C (flocks of up to ten) at Subic sites; a few at MM and PP
76	<b>Coppersmith Barbet</b>	Common in forests
77	<b>Philippine Woodpecker#</b>	Fairly common in forests
78	<b>White-bellied Woodpecker#</b>	Surprisingly common at Subic sites
79	<b>Luzon Flameback#</b>	Fairly common at the Subic sites; one at MM
80	<b>Northern Sooty-Woodpecker#</b>	Fairly common at the Subic sites; one at PdL Trail
81	<b>Hooded Pitta</b>	Crap views of one at LaM
82	<b>Red-bellied Pitta</b>	Great views of three birds at LaM and two on PdL Trail
83	<b>Barn Swallow</b>	Common

84	<b>Pacific Swallow</b>	Common
85	<b>Striated Swallow</b>	Common around Ternate
86	<b>Bar-bellied Cuckooshrike</b>	Common at Subic sites; especially OBR. Also at SSM
87	<b>Blackish Cuckooshrike</b>	Two seen on Aeta Trail, Subic
88	<b>Pied Triller</b>	One in mangroves at Ternate
89	<b>Yellow-wattled Bulbul</b>	Fairly common at UPLB and MM
90	<b>Yellow-vented Bulbul</b>	Common
91	<b>Philippine Bulbul</b>	Common in forests
92	<b>Balicassiao</b>	Common in forests
93	<b>Black-naped Oriole</b>	Common
94	<b>Large-billed Crow</b>	Common
95	<b>Philippine Fairy-bluebird</b>	One seen at MMBG was almost certainly this bird
96	<b>Elegant Tit</b>	Common at MM and PP / PdL
97	<b>Stripe-sided Rhabdornis</b>	Common at MM sites and PP
98	<b>Philippine Magpie-Robin</b>	One seen on creek in UPLB
99	<b>White-browed Shama</b>	One seen well on OBR; commonly heard elsewhere
100	<b>Pied Bushchat</b>	One seen on customs gate at entry to Subic Bay
101	<b>Ashy Thrush</b>	Easy to see at LaM; at least three birds
102	<b>Golden-bellied Gerygone</b>	Common away from Subic; even in Manila
103	<b>Lemon-throated Warbler</b>	One seen at SSM
104	<b>Striated Grassbird</b>	Common in UPLB and TW
105	<b>Philippine Tailorbird</b>	Noisy but sneaky. Widespread in forests.
106	<b>Gray-backed Tailorbird</b>	Seen in low numbers at MM sites, PP and LaM
107	<b>Golden-headed Cisticola</b>	Three seen at Ternate
108	<b>Blue-headed Fantail</b>	Common in forest at PP and PdL Trail
109	<b>Philippine Pied-Fantail</b>	Fairly common in disturbed habitats
110	<b>Mangrove Blue-Flycatcher</b>	One or two pairs with chicks at LaM
111	<b>Black-naped Monarch</b>	One in MMBG; common at PP and PdL Trail
112	<b>Oriental Pipit</b>	One in UPLB
113	<b>White-breasted Woodswallow</b>	Common
114	<b>Brown Shrike</b>	One at TW
115	<b>Long-tailed Shrike</b>	Scattered in open areas or forest edge
116	<b>Asian Glossy Starling</b>	Small flocks seen at Ranrich Beach Resort, Ternate
117	<b>Coledo</b>	Very common at Subic sites
118	<b>Crested Myna</b>	A few seen from NLEX and two at UPLB
119	<b>Grey-throated Sunbird</b>	A pair seen in orchard well above Jamboree Rd, MM
120	<b>Purple-throated Sunbird</b>	Male seen on banana flower, UPLB
121	<b>Olive-backed Sunbird</b>	Common away from Subic Bay
122	<b>Flaming Sunbird</b>	A male seen in a mixed flock on Jamboree Rd, MM
123	<b>Lovely Sunbird</b>	A male seen on coconut blossom in SSM
124	<b>Bicolored Flowerpecker</b>	A pair seen in orchard well above Jamboree Rd, MM
125	<b>Red-striped Flowerpecker</b>	Fairly common at MM sites
126	<b>White-bellied Flowerpecker</b>	One seen at MMBG
127	<b>Pygmy Flowerpecker</b>	One seen at OBR; two at MMBG
128	<b>Lowland White-eye</b>	Common away from Subic Bay

129	<b>Yellowish White-eye</b>	Five seen at flying fox colony, Subic; two at MMBG
130	<b>Eurasian Tree Sparrow</b>	Common
131	<b>Nutmeg Mannikin</b>	Fairly common in grassland / ricefields
132	<b>White-bellied Munia</b>	Common at UPLB
133	<b>Chestnut Munia</b>	Common at UPLB and a couple at TW

### Abbreviations:

STT - Subic Telecom Trail

NLEX - North Luzon Expressway

TW - Ternate Wetlands

MM - Mount Makiling

MMBG - Mount Makiling Botanic Gardens

PdL - Pico de Loro Trail, Mount Palay-Palay

OBR - Orica Bunker Road

UPLB - University of the Philippines Los Banos

LaM - La Mesa Eco-Park, Quezon City

PP - Mount Palay-Palay

SSM - El Bijo Lugiano's Farm, Southern Sierra Madre Mountains

IFW - Ilanin Forest West Road

\* under-recorded

# under-recorded once all see-able woodpeckers were seen

### Site Notes

"Subic Telecom Trail" - This loop trail, about 1-2km in length starts at the security gate for Camayan Beach Resort. The trail runs past a large communications tower, and along the fence of another property. The security guard at the entry gate can help you if you are nice to him... Good for a large variety of birds day and night.

Orica Bunker Road - This virtually car-free sealed road is a delight. Many good birds were seen here. The road starts at the corner of Corregidor Road and Ilanin Forest West Road.

Ilanin Forest West "Road" - This is the road from the junction of Corregidor Road to Camayan Beach Resort.



birding on the Orica Bunker road



Despite a bit of traffic it is very birdy.

Corregidor Road - This is the main road south from Subic Airport. Despite the traffic there are many good birds and habitats represented. Good for seeing raptors.

Aeta Trail - This is signposted from Corregidor Road about a kilometre or so south of the Ilanin Forest West Road junction on the western side. An Aeta guide can take you on the trails for a donation. Great forest here and lots of birds.

Mout Makiling - **Note that we were unable to access the mountain above UPLB due to a recent typhoon.**

UPLB - The campus is huge and quite a few good birds could be seen within the grounds. Some were not seen elsewhere.

Mount Makiling Botanic Gardens - My guide, Steve Salazar, said that this was an excellent site with lots of birds. However for the time we spent here it was at times very quiet. Still worth a look.

Jamboree Road - Fairly quiet road with lots of options and side roads. Like just about every site visited, there were birds seen here that we saw nowhere else.

Above Jamboree Road - Steve took me on a bewildering range of trails and non-trails that would be impossible to describe. This was in order to get to higher elevations denied us by the closure of Mt Makiling; mostly to search for fruit doves. We didn't see any but found a few good raptors and small passerines.

Mount Palay-Palay - This is a favourite site close to Manila for the Wild Bird Club of the Philippines. On the day I walked the road the traffic was very heavy due to a public holiday and the only birds I saw were off the road on illegal logging tracks. This was a little scary.

Beautiful forest.



Pico de Loro Trail - This trail runs off the main Mt Palay-Palay road at the "Ternate 9" kilometre post. I walked it once only. It was very birdy with birds calling constantly. Luckily few walkers were on the track and some excellent birds were seen. It takes about three hours + with birding stops to get to the summit. Well

worth it though! My favourite site.

"Ternate Wetlands" - This is my term for a series of wetlands on the road north from Ternate. About three kilometres past the end of the village a dirt road leads off the main road to "The Valley Christian School". It is well signposted. Behind the school is a series of lakes that run to the coast. The security guards will tell you where to go, especially if you don't approach them the right way. This is private property but I had no trouble getting access. I managed 46 species in fairly quick order, including three species of bittern without moving an inch.

La Mesa Eco-Park - a popular recreation park on the edge of Quezon City but very birdy with two species of pitta and tame ashy thrushes.

El Bijo Lugiano's Farm in the Southern Sierra Madre Mountains - This "site" about 45 minutes' drive west of Antipolo (Manila) is at an elevation of 500m on Mt Tarangka. El Bijo happily let me wander about, and although I had only an hour or so to look for birds I managed a few lifers. Monkeys were heard so the forest is still reasonable. Philippine eagles are still occasionally seen. The site has a picnic area and small shop. I am certain everyone in the area knows the farm if you get lost.

## Diary

### **11<sup>th</sup> August 2014**

In preparation for an 18 day visit to areas surrounding Manila, the Philippines, higher powers blessed me with a slightly destroyed stomach (caused not by alcohol, but by modern medicine) and a lingering five week bout of the flu. At least I didn't have stomach cancer, an unsettling condition normally associated with a drastically reduced life span. Until the gastro guy "sent the dogs in" and looked at my stomach with his fancy camera, cancer was a real chance.

Why I was being punished in this way is unclear. My diet had seen no alcohol, coffee, chocolates, red meat, snack food or anything else that tastes alright for a month. The limits of the human body's ability to ingest endless broccoli, brown rice, herbal tea and skinless chicken was being tested.

Frequent Flyer Points are a joke, aren't they? Mine, with Qantas, reduced my fare from \$958 to \$479 – exactly half in fees and charges!

The Manila-bound plane, an A330-300, gave the impression that it was going to depart on time at 1210. That was until Qantas screwed up. They announced that half a dozen punters were adrift in the terminal somewhere and were being actively hunted. They then said that they were on a late arriving connecting flight. This nonsense ran counter to their next announcement that their baggage needed to be found within our plane and removed. One wonders how their baggage had been loaded hours earlier while the passengers were still in the air on another plane? Then they turned up.

The flight was otherwise uneventful, save for the fact that there were only two small children on the fully booked flight. I think the kids must have been euthanized on boarding because they made no noise.

Gobsmacked describes my look as I left the plane and entered the terminal. Here was an immigration official with a neat card with my name on it in large letters. I quickly considered my options while pondering the statutes of limitations that apply to the various nefarious activities that I thought I'd gotten away with. Surely the Brazilian Government didn't have an extradition treaty with the Philippines and were hunting me for that unpaid driving offence? The other possibility was too horrible to contemplate – I was going to lose a kidney.

Reynaldo from Immigration took me to a special place marked "Senior Citizens". Here he instructed a young lass to process my paperwork post haste. Now this would have been very welcome in normal circumstances but as I had been seated in the very last row on the plane and at a window seat, there was next to nobody waiting at the normal immigration booths by the time I got there anyway.

I was informed that "Johnny Lee" had vouched for me. Yeah, possibly. I had no idea who Johnny Lee was and tentatively asked Reynaldo if he had any other work to do as I waited for my baggage to arrive. He wanted to be sure I was okay to be left alone before he wandered off, never to be seen again.

The assault to the senses as you exit Manila's international airport can never be forgotten. Overlaying the heat and humidity the nose detects a rich blend of industrial and human waste.

After locating Mayette and her friendly and capable brother Bebot, wife Gemma and a small child whose name I've forgotten, we were on our way to Antipolo, part of western Manila. We accomplished this fairly short journey in Bebot's Honda City in about the same time as it took to get to the Philippines from Australia. Traffic in Manila obeys no traffic laws, no natural laws and exists outside the laws of mathematics and physics. You will only understand this if you have experienced it. Traffic in other crowded world cities is not remotely similar.

On the way to Antipolo I learnt two things; one of them important. Due to an attempt to decongest Manila's traffic, only half the registered cars (depending on the vehicle's registration plate I presume) would be allowed on the roads during peak hour the following day. Bebot's car was not one of these. This meant we had to be out of Manila (read: hell) for our drive to Camayan Beach Resort (read: paradise) at 0500. Great. The other bit of news was that Johnny Lee was a friend of Bebot's who had "an in" with the guy at Immigration.

As an aside, many of Manila's drivers were circumventing the registration plate problem by owning two cars....

By the time I got to bed, it was time to get up. I'd dreamt that I'd been front row at a Black Sabbath concert and some uncaring folk had trampled me. Then I performed a quick check



to see that it hadn't actually happened. No, I was in Manila, the dogs were barking, it was 0430 and we were to be on our way.



### **12<sup>th</sup> August 2014**

A few hours' sleep and a couple of bananas later and we were back in the traffic.

The Camayan Beach Resort's website rather optimistically explains that it takes something less than two hours to drive there from Manila. It took us, in the real world, closer to five, including a short breakfast stop at Jollibee's and some shopping at a Subic Bay supermarket.

En route quite a few different birds could be seen in the fields from the North Luzon and Clark-Subic expressways. In fact I think I saw more birds on this "road trip" than the whole time I spent in the Philippines in 1993!

Camayan Beach Resort lived up to expectations. It is owned by three westerners, so it is designed to appeal to overseas visitors. The rooms are spotless, and are well serviced and maintained. The restaurant is open 24 hours and the meals and drinks are good – and not expensive. The adjacent beach has clean water. "Clean" in this context means that you probably won't dissolve by swimming in it, although the occasional attack from a plastic bag or rogue shipping container is always a possibility. A lifeguard (ex-Florida) was on duty. We all enjoyed our time here.

A persistent thick head and the lateness of the morning were insufficient to stop me from testing the tropical sunshine and any birds silly enough to be seen in it. I walked along the road and tried my luck. The first bird seen was a Luzon (tarctic) hornbill. Wow! Nice start. Philippine bul-bul, coledo and green imperial pigeon were soon on the trip list. White-browed shamas were calling everywhere but refused to be seen.

By the time I'd dragged myself away from the beautiful primary forest next to the resort, Mayette and the others had managed to check in. I tossed my stick-thin and sad looking body into Subic Bay and gave the lifeguard something to laugh at as I had my first swim for a month. The water was mild, refreshing and welcome. I spent some time recycling it through my sinuses and felt better for the experience. Emerging after several laconic laps I made a cup of tea (!), wrote in my diary and pondered four nights in lovely forested surroundings.

Mayette joined me for the afternoon's birding effort on the "Orica Bunker Road", starting at 1530. It was very slow at first before dramatically changing as the temperature cooled at ~1630. Birds exploded from the forest in every direction. We scarcely knew where to look! We managed flocks of Philippine green pigeons, white-eared doves, guaiaberos (a small and rather gorgeous parrot), green racquet-tails (another parrot), red-crested malkohas, Luzon flamebacks, bar-bellied cuckoo-shrikes, balicassios, coletos, various bul-buls, pygmy

flowerpecker, orioles and other more common fare.

Perfect weather all day.

I celebrated the day with a couple of San Miguel Lights. Cop that stomach; persist or perish!



**13<sup>th</sup> August 2014**

The Curse of Breakfast once more reared its ugly noggin. This is the one where the "complimentary" brekkie

is only available at a time where there isn't much point walking around before it, and by the time you have finished, the best hour or two of birding is behind you.

A pre-breakfast pre-sunrise swim put me in a perfect state of mind. The forest on the resort's shoreline, whilst big and beautiful, failed to produce much in the way of birds. After eating, I started walking up the road, being picked up by Bebot shortly thereafter and taken back to the Orica Bunker Road. The bunkers date from the Korean War and according to an old guy I was to meet later on the holiday who worked there, they were used principally to repair shot planes, as unlikely as this seems.

The weather was perfect yet again, partly cloudy with no hint of monsoon rain. The birding was reasonable with Philippine falconets, Philippine coucals and northern sooty woodpeckers added to my "life list", leaving plenty of room for extra sightings. Other birds seen included ruddy kingfishers and coppersmith barbets.

I soon discovered that Philippine forests give up their secrets slowly. You will never see the majority of see-able birds on the first day. This is rather fun in its own way – if you have plenty of time. There will always be something to search for.... A strange aspect of the pristine and largely unhunted forests around Subic Bay is the extra-ordinary lack of small passerines. Anything smaller than a bul-bul is quite uncommon.

A pre-lunch snorkel in front of the resort was disappointing. The water wasn't very clear and most of the coral was dead. According to the locals, the deceased coral was a lingering after-effect of the Mt Pinatubo eruption in 1991. I'm not so sure. Surprisingly there were plenty of fish, but the water clarity (or lack thereof) prevented me from exploring deeper waters or those further offshore.

Mayette's brother Rody visited us. He had business in Subic Bay, which is a major seaport for Manila and beyond. A couple of San Mig Lights were enjoyed with lunch with no apparent ill-effect to my recovering digestive system. My flu seemed to have transferred to

someone less deserving.



A sunny afternoon preceded a late birding effort on the "Telecom Road", starting 100m or so up the hill from the resort's entry gate. If you follow this short road it leads to a gated fence. You can walk along a track beside the fence on the right hand side and then onto a

sealed but unused road back to the resort's entry gate. Here the security guard will tell you that the road is off-limits even though nobody seems to recall why. If you smile a lot and tell him what you are doing he will give you permission to walk it. Otherwise start from the Telecom Road end and wave as you walk past him. The highlight was great views of a male spotted buttonquail, a real stunner. Later a flock of ten very confiding hornbills were seen closely, low down and feeding on small fruits. These birds are so common and bold around Subic that they sometimes nest inside power poles!

Post-dinner spotlighting along the Telecom Circuit was frustrating. Although I had really nice views of two Philippine nightjars, calling Philippine hawk-owls, frogmouths and eagle-owls failed to be seen.



**14<sup>th</sup> August 2014**

400 or so swimming strokes, sunrise, a negotiated early breakfast (thanks Arnold!) and a glorious sunny day. I was impressed and happy to see Mayette, Bebot and Gemma join me in the water for such an early start to the day.

The plan was to go the Subic Bay flying fox colony, located opposite the southernmost of Subic Airport's buildings. I had started walking up the road from Camayan expecting to be picked up shortly thereafter by Mayette and the gang after they finished their breakfast. After an hour and a half I thought something had gone wrong and started back down the road, only to see Bebot's now familiar car approaching. Never mind, a pair of my "target birds", the increasingly uncommon blue-naped parrot, were seen well right next to the road at eye height.

The flying foxes did what they do so well – hang about and look hot. The colony has both golden-crowned (*Pteropus vampyrus*) - the world's largest bat, and giant (*Acerodon jubatus*) flying foxes.

The other guys went to Subic to buy some genuine rip-off Nike gear while I started walking back toward Camayan Beach, dodging long-tailed macaques and the traffic. Philippine serpent-eagles were added to the list. Other birds of note included several sightings of white-bellied woodpeckers, Luzon woodpeckers and lots of hornbills. The weather was hot without being oppressive. About 30 degrees with a slight breeze.

A lazy lunch and afternoon before Bebot dropped Mayette and I off at an Aeta (local indigenes) trail. Mayette gasbagged with Norma whilst Tamin and I hit the trails. Tamin speaks bugger all English and the walk was something of a frogmarch that ultimately ended in some mangroves. Many birds were calling, including numbers of blue-naped parrots. It was clear to me that the completion of the mission was of more importance to Tamin than any experience that might be had along the way. Rufous coucal and blackish cuckoo-shrike were the best of the new birds seen. Norma and Tamin are proud and honest folk who refused any "donation" beyond what they thought was fair for their services. Amazing.

Declaring myself fit, I ordered a San Mig "Red Horse", my first full strength beer for five weeks, an



Indigenous Aeta folk: Tamin and Norma

unenviable record that I hope never to repeat. It was later that I learnt that San Miguel Light is not actually low-alcohol but low-carbs. No wonder I was getting slightly tanked. Spotlighting beckoned. Ah, I couldn't be bothered.

### 15<sup>th</sup> August 2014

A wonderful routine was becoming established – a pre-dawn swim followed by a lavish breakfast. The morning's birding was undertaken within walking distance – on the Telecom Circuit. Two new endemics were seen in Philippine woodpecker and Philippine tailorbird.

Another sunny day saw the four of us going for a walk along the beach to the next headland, with Gemma collecting a few shells and Mayette going for a dip. The persistent sunshine saw me back in the water for some pre-lunch snorkelling, but the water clarity was no better.



A post-lunch quandary presented itself – whether to have a full body massage (@ \$10 per hour) or go back to the Orica Bunker Road? Although I hardly needed the exercise I opted for the walk (of course). Happily, and on my ninth or tenth attempt, I managed to call out a white-browed shama, not a rare bird but bloody difficult to see. It even posed for a photograph! A long downhill stroll failed yet again to uncover the rare and local white-



browed tit. In fact I failed to see any tits at all, more's the pity...

Bebot picked me up and I soon found myself ensconced at the bar with birding notes, diary, San Miguel and pen in hand, plotting the next day's attack. I love this stuff!

96 hours into a wet season holiday and not a single drop of rain. Surely it couldn't last.

A peculiarity of Filipinos is their fascination with typhoons. If ever you ask anyone about the weather forecast there is always the word 'typhoon' in it. Arnold, one of the resort's waiters, went as far as saying there was not one but four typhoons on their way. Golly, I hope they all find some space for themselves. It would be a shame to be a typhoon, with your very own name, only to get eaten by one of your mates.

Our last night at Camayan....

### **16<sup>th</sup> August 2014**

Rody, his wife Isis and their two staff were to join us for lunch at Camayan, thus ensuring one last morning in the field for me!

A swim, monster breakfast and another perfect day beckoned. The restaurant staff said to Mayette that I never stopped moving. Anyway, off to the Telecom Circuit for me for some productive birding. Pink-necked pigeon, lesser frigatebird and black-naped tern were added to the site list.

My 0930 return to the resort saw my family anxiously awaiting the arrival of Rody and Isis, who were rumoured to be in the vicinity. Philippine plans are never too solid at the best of times. They are likely to change several times in terms of the number of participants, start and finish times, food and drink options and activities to be undertaken. So what started off as an extended family lunching, swimming and making merry gig, ended up in Rody and Isis and their staff Celeste and Priscilla spending the whole day driving to and from Manila for the sake of lunch. They arrived a little before 1200.

Celeste was charged with looking after a small fluffy dog. The dog, named Linus, was wearing a nappy. This wasn't the only thing that was confusing me. I spent quite some time trying to work out Celeste's sex. The name should have been a give-away in any normal circumstances. I was punting on 'male' on the basis of a cursory examination for bumpy bits. I reserved my final judgement.

Our enormous lunch took a couple of hours to demolish. We said our sad goodbyes to the wonderful waiters, reception and other staff at Camayan and transferred our luggage to Rody's Toyota SUV for the ride back to his place in San Juan City, Manila.

Once we cleared Subic Bay the journey became quite exciting. Rody was a tad sleepy – I don't blame him – and used the time-honoured "drive faster" method for staying awake. Terminal velocity for a Toyota with six



it pays to check out the equipment before use



people, luggage and a dog is over 140 km/h. This was achieved in heavy rain. Yes, the monsoon had finally found us. Hurtling towards Manila, I pondered the wisdom of not finalising my will before leaving Sydney. At one point we stopped on the side of the motorway so that Rody could rest. This attracted the attention of a uniformed gentleman who pondered what was happening (he wasn't alone). He was dismissed.

We stopped at a roadside restaurant so that one of our party could eat half a hamburger. This was puzzling so soon after lunch. Anyway. The day was to offer more thrills. We queued for 35 minutes to pay the motorway toll, rather reducing any benefit we may have gained from driving on it. Then we reached the Manila traffic. I started to realise why the dog had a nappy....

Hieronymus Bosch and Francisco Goya were inspired to their greatest works of art after being trapped in Manila traffic. And if that didn't work, there was always Rody's garage. Here lived two largish dogs and an indeterminate number of cats. A rich animal by-product



aroma greeted us as we exited the vehicle and made bee-lines for toilet facilities.

I was pining for a beer or twelve. "Prissy" (Priscilla) was given the worthwhile task of going to the beer shop (a.k.a. a hole in the wire mesh across the road) and procuring same – at the very reasonable rate of 60 cents / bottle. I continued to collect

evidence on my enquiry into Celeste's sex.

Dinner was delayed on account of Mayette's sisters Oyie and Judith. These fine folk were to join us but had to endure a short four hour journey from just down the road.

After a lovely meal – Rody and Isis are exceptional and very generous hosts – Mayette and I made a journey across the lane to Rody and Isis' guest accommodation. Here the unmistakable sounds of San Juan City lulled me to sleep. I learned the true value of earplugs and a sleeping mask.

## **17<sup>th</sup> August 2014**

A locally-inspired plan (see notes on 'plans', above) was to get me to La Mesa Eco-Park. This partly forested recreation park is adjacent to La Mesa Dam, which forms part of Manila's



water supply network, located nearby in Quezon City. It was suggested to me that I get there early in the morning. Couldn't agree more.

It being a Sunday, most of the family went to church. Meanwhile Celeste shovelled animal waste down the drain in the gutter whilst Prissy made me a lovely breakfast. Other activities filled the morning. I watched as a relative outsider (no pun intended). It was agreed that we would go to Rody and Isis' daughter Julie-Anne's place for lunch. Rody bought the food (and very nice too) along the way. When we arrived at Julie-Anne's place I was a little surprised to find her and family were not home.

Our early morning start to La Mesa saw us arrive there a little after 1400. This was okay with me as I hadn't expected to go there at all on this particular day.



La Mesa is a wonderful site for birds and for seeing happy people enjoying picnics and having a swim. A couple of trails at the far end of the reserve are pretty much deserted. They are very birdy. Ashy thrushes were easy to see. Red-bellied pittas stared at us from a few feet away. Barred rails, lowland white-eyes, mangrove blue-flycatchers and golden-bellied gerygones were also seen. Other widespread forest birds abounded.

We returned to Julie-Anne's place in Quezon City. Julie is married to Don, a lawyer and a very friendly and interesting chap. We soon left Don and Julie's home for the short drive to San Juan, arriving the same day. It was back in San Juan that I determined that Celeste is probably a girl after all.

## **18<sup>th</sup> August 2014**

Bebot and Gemma picked us up at 0615 for our next destination, Mount Makiling, south of Manila and located near Laguna de Bay, where we had planned to spend three nights.

Sisters-in-law Judith and Oyie joined us for the first part of the trip. They needed to get home and they lived “on the way”. In Australia “on the way” means slowing down and hurling the object / passenger / drugs or whatever out the window or door. This generally makes a meaningless difference to the overall travel time. Not so in the Philippines. Much of the extra delay is caused by the strange road network and the time penalties involved in getting off motorways – and back on to them again. Bastards Incorporated was awarded all the motorway contracts.

As we approached Laguna we stopped to pick up an old family friend, Tony, as well as a guy named Steven who had been engaged (this was news to me) to act as my birding guide for our time at Mt Makiling.



Earlier, Mike, a member of the Wild Bird Club of the Philippines had recommended Trees Hostel as our accommodation. This hotel is located within the grounds of the University of the Philippines Los Banos (UPLB), and adjacent to Mt Makiling. It might be good. I have no idea. They were fully booked and had been for eight months.

Our next choice was the privately operated SEARCA Hotel, also on UPLB. They couldn't offer us consecutive nights. The university-owned Continuing Education Centre's hotel was our last option and happily they had plenty of rooms. These have private facilities and although fairly Spartan in their furnishing and servicing, were air-conditioned, clean, very quiet and inexpensive.

Steven made an ambit claim of 3000 pesos/day for guiding fees. This was quickly negotiated down to 700 + accommodation, meals and performance-based tips. I never got around to asking him where he dreamt up the 3000 figure from. The waiters at Camayan Beach Resort were paid 300 pesos / day.

We poked about the university grounds picking up a number of new birds in the process – gray-backed tailorbird, purple-throated sunbird, brown-crested bul-bul, Philippine magpie-robin and the rather lovely indigo-banded kingfisher.

In the late afternoon Steven went home to pick up his “stuff” prompting fears from some that he wouldn’t return. But what else was he going to do? Apparently he was out of work after spending time doing raptor research and a number of other wildlife and conservation-based contracts.

The evening saw us spotlighting around the university. Almost as soon as we started we had a Philippine scops-owl on its nest. This was followed by some large insect-eating bats with strong eye shine. A Luzon hawk-owl was seen well. We failed to see Philippine eagle-owls despite two or three of them calling in response to our tape. It was good to see the smaller owls though.

### **19<sup>th</sup> August 2014**

The way Steve explained it, the variety and numbers of birds that could be seen in the Mount Makiling Botanic Gardens would overwhelm me. I wasn’t so sure. We started early on another fine day. We waited for someone to open the gate – situation normal. The



site is beautiful, despite the attentions of Typhoon Glenda, which visited a month earlier and modified much of the forest. The damage was much worse within the grounds of the university where ~30-40% of the trees were toppled.

The Botanic Gardens has many birds. Seeing them is a different matter. Lots of them flashed through the foliage without being identified. A rufous-bellied eagle was not one of these. Steve explained that whenever there are balicassiao (the local equivalent of noisy miners) squawking about in the one spot, there is often an owl or raptor to be found. It was so. The eagle was perched near the top of a tree. Nice looking animal and one that I’d missed throughout its range. Significantly Steve said that this was a new bird for him and possibly the first sighting for Mt Makiling.

The next few hours were tough. The strange rhabdornis was seen (often) along with a few white-eyes and flowerpeckers.



Bad news. Once more my attempts to get to the higher sections of Mt Makiling had been thwarted. The road and subsequent track had been closed by the authorities due to the number of fallen trees – until further notice. We had lunch and returned to the hotel, finding a student's wallet on the road along the way. We handed the wallet to the hotel's reception. I sat for a few hours doing pretty much nothing at all and enjoyed it. It finally decided to rain during this time – good timing.

The rain stopped at 1445. We asked Bebot to take us to the nearby Boy Scout Camp area where we walked the roads. This was interesting, productive and relaxing. Elegant tit, plain bush-hen, red junglefowl and Philippine hanging-parrot were the best of the birds.

Dinner was two time zones away from UPLB at a fancy restaurant where we sat on floating cabanas on a duck pond (sans ducks). The food was great. So was the beer – despite the restaurant not having any. Bebot fixed this by going across the road to a beer shop – well done sir!

## **20<sup>th</sup> August 2014**

As we weren't able to access the higher parts of the reserved section of Mt Makiling, Steve took me up behind the Scout Camp where we gained a couple of hundred metres of altitude by virtue of roads, walking tracks and bamboo thickets. We skirted savage dogs on chains and politely asked orchardists for access through their land. Fruit-doves were said to be in the area but we dipped. Birds were scarce. Plenty of interesting orchids kept me amused.



At one point we found ourselves on a ridge with long views. Here raptors could be seen – oriental honey-buzzard, Philippine serpent-eagles and a Philippine hawk-eagle. Other birds spotted included flaming and plain-throated sunbirds.

The day was clear and hot. The roads were actively flowing downhill. We knew this as our thongs kept bonding to the tar.



A short afternoon rest was followed by a long stroll outside the university and into the wilds of the local barangay (village). Sara-May, a ten year old schoolgirl kept us company for a half hour or so until she spotted one of her friends and ran away. The highlight of the walk, aside from living to the end of it, was walking through a mixed crop field where barred buttonquails, striated grassbirds and a number of other open-ground specialist birds were seen.

We exited UPLB for dinner. Our restaurant was a place where they serve unlimited rice with meals. There are not too many overweight Filipinos. We discovered where many of them



eat. Dehydration had come my way so I attacked a halo-halo, a local confection of ice cream, coconut milk ice, jelly, lollies and other colourful stuff that cooled my system to a point where I stopped spontaneously setting fire to serviettes.

Given that we'd only spent nine hours on our feet, Steve and I went spotlighting. We managed to see scops-owl and hawk-owl again but failed to see or hear

frogmouths or eagle-owl. We staggered back to the hotel.

## **21<sup>st</sup> August 2014**

We were concerned for Bebot. During the night he had apparently been possessed by the Ghost of Maria Makiling, a renowned local spirit who gets up to all sorts of mischief, depending on who you speak with and your level of tolerance for this sort of stuff. He had a restless night and spoke loudly and at length in unknown tongues.

It was agreed that Steve and I would have one last shot at Philippine trogon and spotted wood-kingfisher in the hilliest and most inhospitable terrain we could find; returning mid to late morning for a departure back toward Manila.

Entering the forest above the Botanic Gardens we quickly descended to a beautiful river. Frustratingly a glimpsed pitta, probably a blue-winged – a rare bird for the Philippines – and seen by Steve at the same site a couple of weeks earlier, disappeared without trace. This is an ability only pittas have. We then crashed and bashed around the forest on the far side of the river playing the trogon and kingfisher tapes every 50 metres or so. To give Steve his due, he is more of a stop-and-wait birder than I will ever be. This eventually paid off in the form of a spotted wood-kingfisher sitting in the gloom and calling to an unseen bird nearby. A probable Philippine fairy-bluebird perched in bad light was seen at the same site.

The pitta was again glimpsed on the return journey but too poorly to make an identification.

Stumps were drawn on Mt Makiling. We returned to the hotel where we had an early lunch at a food stall outside the hotel. We left UPLB, a wonderful place despite many of the trees being flattened; a place where young women outnumbered young men, and where, sadly, I was the oldest person seen for three days....

We paid Steve, dropped him off along the main road ("on the way" – Australian style) and made a few stops at roadside food and fruit stalls. Our next formal destination was Judith's Shop, a simple eatery managed successfully by one of Mayette's sisters. This made Judith, her girlfriend, Mayette and the Ghost of Maria Makiling very happy.

Mayette and I were to stay for two nights with her very capable and positive elder sister Oyie in Muntinlupa City, another city on the outskirts of Manila, and surrounded on all sides by lots of other people. Oyie's son, "JR", greeted us. JR is a gentle and lovely guy. This is good for world peace because he's fairly large. He had recently gone to a shopping mall and stepped on to some weighing scales that audibly tell you your weight. They said this to JR "one at a time please". So we're thinking about 300 pounds.



Yet another of Mayette's sisters, Norma, and her partner Noel and their family came to stay. Noel works for a motorway company – so we had plenty to talk about.

**22<sup>nd</sup> August 2014**

A coffee and a peanut butter sandwich was enough fuel to get me walking the streets of

Muntinlupa. A small lake lay a short distance away. Whilst nothing exciting was seen, quite a few native birds could be seen or heard in the leafier streets. And for local excitement, I stood some sort of chance of being robbed or kidnapped, according to some of the folk I chatted with.

Oyie's daughter Jenny, a very jolly and kind young lady, lent me her laptop. I spent some time catching up with news and emails and trying to contact accommodation providers in and around Ternate, our last stopping place ex-Manila. We had three resorts to choose from. Only one – the Puerto Azul Golf and Country Club answered their phone. They explained that many of their better rooms had been squashed by falling things. They proposed jamming us into a smaller crappier room and very generously offered to charge us the same rate as the better but sadly flatter 'deluxe quad'. This meant \$US175 per night. We were less thanwhelmed.

The Ternate Beach Resort failed to answer any of the seven contact numbers that were listed on their website or Facebook page. Later in the day the Ranrich Beach Resort thrilled us by accepting our call and our booking.

Having met my day's main targets – discovering that Australia still existed and booking accommodation at Ternate, I celebrated in the usual way....

### **23<sup>rd</sup> August 2014**

Gemma and Bebot picked us up and took us to Rody's place at San Juan. Lunch was at Chili's, a restaurant that serves good but locally expensive food. Joining us was a fairly large cast of family members including another of Mayette's sisters, Mhyrna. Rody generously paid a small fortune for the feast.

Julie-Anne and Don agreed that I could stay at their place in Quezon City overnight, allowing for a quick transfer to La Mesa Eco-Park the next morning.



### **24<sup>th</sup> August 2014**

We arrived at La Mesa at 0740 after plundering Macca's for breakfast. Please don't tell anyone I did this!

I met up with Jovic, a birder and photographer hailing from Mindanao. He was searching for a rufous paradise-flycatcher that had been reported in the area. We failed to see it. However he put me onto a hooded pitta - happy. A Philippine hawk-cuckoo was the best of the other birds. Ashy thrushes were again easy to see.



Don and Julie took me back to Rody's place. I was then left in peace with Celeste and Prissy, a few San Migs and the local newspaper, whilst the rest of the family went to the shops.

Othello is the son of yet another of Mayette's sisters – Christy. He and wife Whilma and their two girls picked us up and took us for a delicious dinner at Casa Juanita, a converted mansion with extensive and eclectic collections of plate, glassware and oriental objets d'art.

We decamped to a bar / restaurant at Antipolo that overlooks Manila, the view being rather spectacular. Thanks Othello!



Back to Gemma and Bebot's home at Antipolo for a welcome but typically fractured Philippine sleep.

## **25<sup>th</sup> August 2014**

I had uncertain expectations of Ternate and Mt Palay-Palay. Some had said it was a waste of time going there; others thought it used to be good but the birds had decamped. I was keen to find out one way or the other.

We left Antipolo at 0715 on National Heroes Day, a public holiday, one of 20 observed each year in the Philippines! And probably one of 20 days in each year when you can drive from Manila to Ternate in two hours, as we did.

Our arrival at Ranrich was coincident with Mayette chucking a wobbly. She thought the manager had put a curse on her. Although Eric, the said manager, wasn't the prettiest guy on the planet, I doubted his ability to project curses. The day was falling apart. Thankfully Gemma came to the rescue and reassured Mayette that the curse was likely to have a short half-life. After all, if Bebot could self-exorcise the Ghost of Maria Makiling, a mystical being of local renown, then there was some hope that any curse from a resort owner (that nobody had ever heard of) wouldn't be all that powerful.

It should be made clear that Ranrich Beach Resort has no beach to speak of, unless an almost unbroken chain of plastic bags, disposable nappies and other detritus mixed with black sand could be considered a beach. You wouldn't dare swim off it – and this is an opinion shared by management. And it certainly isn't a resort. For a start they serve no meals. They supply no bog rolls or soap and only sufficient towels for exactly half the

number of guests checked in. On the plus side, the air-con works and one of the three beds in our bungalow was suitable for humans to sleep on.



Eric tried to charge us the day entry fee for their swimming pool for each of us for each day we were staying, but curses or not, Mayette and Bebot were having none of this. The manager recanted.

Good was finally triumphing over evil as Bebot took me for an afternoon visit to nearby Mt Palay-Palay.

The holiday traffic on the road was almost continuous. I headed for side-tracks into the forest. These were illegal logging tracks into Mt Palay-Palay National Park. I saw no evidence that the park had any staff and although plenty of illegal loggers were in evidence nobody seemed to care. Disturbingly they all stared at me as I walked past them.

The best thing that happened, although I didn't know it at the time, was to discover the start point for the Pico de Loro Trail, a track to the highest point in the region. Public holiday climbers were descending in droves. I poked about on the first few hundred metres but didn't venture too far as I didn't have the time.

There have been very few occasions on my travels where I have found myself in a dodgy situation, as happened this day. Emerging onto the main road from a now rarely used track I see three young guys walking down the main road just above me. I had planned to sit on some concrete bollards on other side of the road that afford a view over a valley. I went there as planned and sat down. They told me 'not to jump' as a kind of joke, but then crossed the road and sat next to me. They quickly asked whether I was alone. I said no, my bayaw (brother-in-law) was following. I kept looking across at the trail for this fictitious person as did my new "friends". I took careful note of the appearance of these guys. One

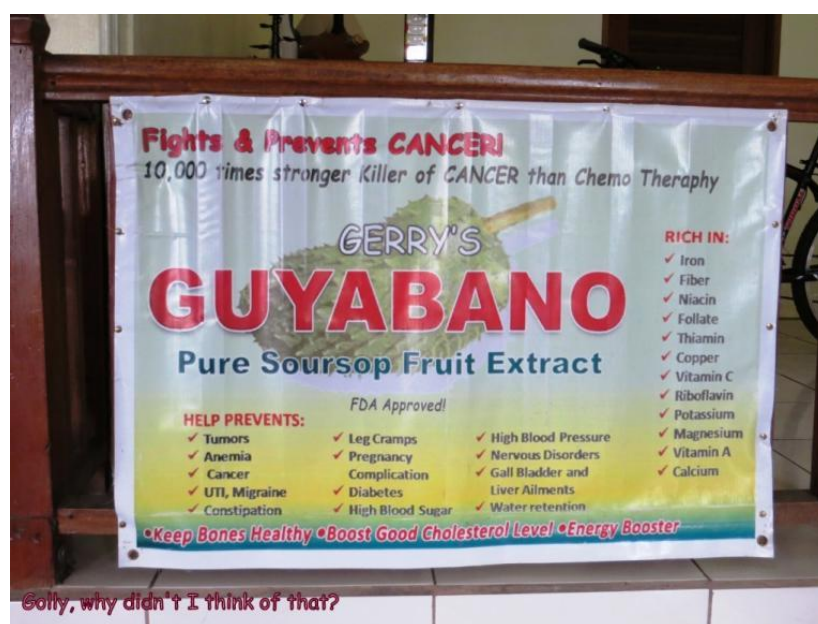
was armed with a machete and large hand saw for cutting trees. I asked one of the others whether it hurt when his monster ear-ring was inserted. They mumbled to each other in a language I didn't understand (i.e. any language, really). When it became fairly clear to me that I was the only gig in town I waited for some approaching traffic and abruptly walked swiftly uphill.

Who knows what might have happened? Probably nothing too exciting. Still, I was happy that they buggered off. I later learnt from local fishermen that they were from the Visayan Islands and were drug addicts – although trusting intelligence from fisherman is fraught.

Mayette's sister Mhyrna, her driver and a niece and nephew joined us for dinner and stayed the night. I should point out that Mayette has other sisters that do not figure in this report.....

## 26<sup>th</sup> August 2014

Disappointingly but hardly surprisingly it was bucketing with rain in the early hours and into the morning. I poked about the resort looking at clouds and pondering many time and motion options if and when the rain stopped. A lone Philippine duck flew past.



I had hoped to assault Pico de Loro. By 0900 this option seemed as unlikely as my climb of Mt Makiling. As the rain eased I decided to walk along the road north of Ternate in the direction that the duck had apparently flown from. Bebot generously offered to drive me out of town with the idea that I would walk back. I took no pack or water – just my binoculars.

About three kilometres north of Ternate is a side road that heads toward the coast. It is signposted to "The Valley Christian School". The person who heads the school pecking order presumably lives in an impressive house about 300 metres in and on the right hand side of



the road. Behind this house is a wonderful wetland – or at least this was the case at the time of my visit. 46 different birds were seen in this vicinity in a couple of hours!

The property behind the school is privately owned. Security guards Oscar and Manuel gave me access. Somewhat surprisingly I had never seen a black bittern. This was soon resolved with three blacks, a few yellows and a dozen or so cinnamons all seen from the back corner of the school commandant's house.

I'd asked Oscar whether there were any other small lakes in the vicinity and he said there wasn't. A few minutes later I asked him whether he ever sees any wild ducks. Yeah, plenty – down the trail behind the school's fence on the small lakes there. Bingo.

There were no ducks that I could see but there were plenty of Philippine collared-doves, night-herons, waterhens, bee-eaters, kingfishers and a number of crakes. I flushed a snipe, probably Swinhoe's, an early return for this bird (assuming that birds can read field guides). All told I felt as if the morning rain had done me a favour.

Lunch was at Lolo Claro's Restaurant at the nearby village of Maragandon. They do a fantastic crispy pata (deep-fried pork hocks with crispy skin – yum!).



Ternate is far more laid back than other places we visited. There are far fewer cars – but gazillions of tricycles.

Bebot told me that somehow the locals had agreed not to shoot the birds anymore. I don't know about this, but there certainly were plenty of things flying about.

We found ourselves to be the 'resort's' only occupants. Even the manager had gone. We had three swimming pools to ourselves. I used one of them after lunch, although doing laps in a 12 metre square pool

requires some concentration.

Bebot had met with an old friend, a fisherman, who had offered to take us to an island that lay across the channel in front of the resort. It was said that this island was filled with birds. Two problems were evident. Firstly the island was unusual in that it was attached to the mainland, allowing lots of dogs and cats on board. Secondly the rain had returned and didn't look like it was going anywhere.

A boat picked us up from the 'beach'. The four guys sitting in it had enormous quantities of beer. The real reason for the activity was soon evident and it didn't have much to do with birds. We found our way to the hovel belonging to the island's fish farmer. At least we managed to get out of the rain. We chatted "fish", a known language worldwide. These guys displayed recognisable traits found in all fisherfolk – someone else was killing all 'their' fish. The details are unimportant. I patted a goat, probably the first kindness ever shown it.

Although the island clearly wasn't a paradise for birds, common kingfisher and pied triller were silly enough to add themselves to the trip list.

As dusk fell the rain stopped.

## **27<sup>th</sup> August 2014**

Awake well before sunrise I was thrilled to see stars! Happily Bebot is also an early riser and we plotted our attack on this, my last planned day in the field. However a combination of low expectations, dumb luck and great weather was to make this the best birding day of the holiday.

Bebot dropped me at the trailhead for Pico de Loro at 0600, with a pick-up planned for 1300.

Yesterday's weather had turned the track into a muddy swamp. The early start ensured I was the first person on it. This wasn't important – it was critical!

I hadn't intended to walk to the peak, at 700 metres, the highest point in the area. It was more of a sneaky barefooted walk through the forest and see what comes along. Earlier rain had washed insects, fruit and flowers onto the track so it was no surprise to see some good birds on it. These included two sightings of red-bellied pitta, and one each of red junglefowl and slaty-legged crane (a new bird for me). While watching a northern sooty woodpecker a Philippine cuckoo-dove crash-landed in a nearby tree.



Pico de Loro takes itself seriously enough to have a base camp and checkpoint. This partly cleared area in the forest would be excellent for birds if you had the time to lurk, as there is primary forest on all sides.

I signed the register and paid my 25 pesos. The boys at the base camp asked me how many there were in my party and looked blankly at me as I said "one". I sloshed off along the trail. The trail bounces up and down for a couple of kilometres or so before ascending steeply. Just after the start of the climb the first of four Philippine trogons was seen. All along the trail birds were calling and flying about. Every few hundred metres or so there would be a mixed flock, generally always comprising blue-headed fantails, black-naped monarchs, stripe-sided rhabdornis and elegant tit along with whatever else had happened along.

As often happens in rainforest a mystery grey shape exploded off the path ahead and crashed into the undergrowth. I had no idea what it was; maybe a scops-owl was perched low? Bugger. A couple of minutes later, at 0825, the mystery was solved when what would have been another Luzon bleeding-heart flew low but directly ahead on a steep straight section of the trail. It landed about 20 metres away and turned in a three-quarter view to



stare me down. I had a good long look at this wonderful dove before fumbling the camera out of my pocket. Typical result – just as the camera tried to focus, the bird took flight.

I was so happy! To this point I'd had a very successful trip given that I hadn't travelled more than 100 km from Manila in any direction. I know that bleeding-hearts are difficult and I hadn't expected to see one. My day

(and a number of subsequent days!!) could not be ruined.

Incredibly, just one minute later, some climbers descended past me. If I'd been two minutes late I wouldn't have seen the bird. I was so excited I just had to tell someone. The climbers gave me a wide berth. I guess a lone greying white man with no shoes or shirt has that effect. I asked them how far it was to the top – 20-30 minutes. Hmmm, now the birds are out of the way – let's climb the mountain!

The last section of track is not technically difficult but requires a degree of concentration – not dangerous but lots of boulders, tree roots and slippery slopes.

The campsite just below the summit had a few hardy campers packing up for the descent. My appearance seemed to confuse them. They commented on my lack of clothing or footwear. I smiled a lot and commented on the magnificent view. And it really is. You can see to Manila, the Batangas and beyond. If I ever go back I will spend the whole day doing the walk and spend some hours staring at the view and the forest below. Maybe leave two hours before sunrise and do some spotlighting?

A quick descent past the departing campers ensured I was once more the first bod on the trail for some hours. I hadn't expected to see too much more in the way of birds. It was more an exercise in not hurting myself so that the San Migs could have full value.

Hullo, what's this? A mixed flock that included scale-feathered and red-crested malkohas, balicassiaos, Philippine coucal, Luzon hornbills, two trogons, the usual tits, monarchs, rhabdornis, fantails and a gorgeous and unmistakable chestnut-winged cuckoo, low in the undergrowth and apparently taking an interest in the tits (!). Once more, this is a very early return for a migratory cuckoo. I had never seen one elsewhere - what a stunning bird! The best looking cuckoo I've seen.

My companions were waiting for me as I emerged from the forest at 1230. Once more we had a wonderful lunch at Lolo Claro's before returning to the resort for a well-deserved swim.

My patient and worthwhile travel companions pleaded a case for an early return to Manila. Sure, why not. Everything was going to be anti-climactic for me now anyway. The journey



took seven hours. Bebot had arranged to meet someone “on the way” at Tagaytay. I had no map with me so failed to realise that Tagaytay was in almost the opposite direction to Manila. We waited for the friend for two hours. This wasn’t all bad as the waiting spot overlooked the Taal Volcano. Here the local (black) race of peregrine falcon perched nearby. It is such a stunning bird that Bebot started asking questions about buying binoculars. Yes!



The mother of all traffic jams that is Manila delayed my long anticipated celebratory beers until after 2130.

## **28<sup>th</sup> August 2014**

Our last full day in the Philippines held low expectations. Mayette and Gemma had gone shopping in the city. Bebot asked if I’d like to go east, into the Southern Sierra Madre Mountains. Why not!

The area east of Antipolo quickly becomes hilly and then mountainous. Most of the forest and its prior occupants has been removed. It started to rain as we pulled off the road so that



Bebot could ask some locals where we might walk inside a forest. I stayed in the car, having little confidence that a positive answer could be gained.

El Bijo Lugiano, 79, at left, and owner of a fairly large orchard that bears his name said we could poke about his property if we cared to. This brilliant

result coincided with heavier and persistent rain. We discovered that El Bijo had worked for the Americans at Subic Bay during the Korean War. He explained that the movie "Hamburger Hill" had been shot, for the most part, on his property.

Many Filipinos have a conspiracy theory about most things, particularly when it comes to buried treasure, munitions or other valuables. El Bijo's theory for the movie was that they were really interested in casing the joint for buried Japanese treasure and the movie was just a by-catch. He further explained that foreigners, as recently as the day prior to our visit, routinely turn up and ask the strangest questions..... (Me? No). Mt Tarangka, as the area is locally known, was indeed the site of a Japanese camp during WW2 and El Bijo had found uniforms, weapons, helmets and other war stuff in caves and elsewhere about the place.

Being wet and at an elevation of 500 metres, it was actually quite cold. We bought lunch and drinks from the farm's small shop. Fried chicken was ordered but the chooks had other ideas and failed to be captured. Good thinking. Plan B.

The rain let up at about 1430 allowing for an hour or so to look about. The Lugiano farm is quite good for birds. The area is comprised of moderately spectacular pointy limestone pinnacles interspersed with relatively flat valleys that have been planted out with coconuts and fruit trees - along with some cattle. El Bijo told us that there is still an occasional Philippine eagle about the place but not near as many as there used to be, when up to five birds could be seen at once.

June, a wiry young guy that works the farm, joined me for a walk – straight downhill to the bottom of the valley. I think he thought it would be fun to try to kill me with exercise. Monkeys were heard. Where there are monkeys there is still good habitat for other animals. Lemon-throated leaf-warbler, Philippine drongo-cuckoo and lovely sunbird were soon added to my life list. There were plenty of Luzon hornbills, bar-bellied cuckoo-shrikes and a distant probable Philippine hawk-cuckoo.

The lovely sunbird was feeding on coconut blossom. June thought I was interested in the coconuts, not the bird, and my lack of Tagalog meant that nothing could stop him climbing the slippery palm to get at some young coconuts – yummo!

Bebot was cock-a-hoop at making new friends, and vowed to return at a later date with Gemma for a picnic at the farm's picnic shelters. The return journey to Antipolo took 45 minutes – not too far.

## **29<sup>th</sup> August 2014**

Last goodbyes from Mayette's family meant that six of us slept in a bedroom designed for two.

Our flight back to Sydney theoretically departed at 2030. So we left Antipolo, Manila at 1100 for lunch at Aristocrat's Restaurant, a local landmark on Manila Bay. We arrived at 1230, an amazingly quick giant slalom through the traffic. Lunch was rather ordinary but this hardly

mattered. My brain had switched to 'travel mode' and the only thing I cared about was getting on and off exactly one plane.

Bebot was pulled over by traffic police for running a red light. He gesticulated furiously, refused to show his license and directed the glares of the two officers at me, explaining that I was an important Australian Colonel who needed to get away fast. He then drove off. I must find out whether he ever received something in the mail.

We arrived at the airport a healthy six hours before our flight. We said our heartfelt goodbyes and thanks and entered the utter chaos and nonsense that is Ninoy Aquino International Airport. Too many people and not enough space.

Now you would expect that we were the first to arrive for our flight, but you'd be wrong on that count. Many others were there before us and all for the same reason – the mysteries of Manila's traffic.

We queued for two and a half hours to check-in, pay the departure tax and pass through immigration and customs. My estimate of the immigration queue was 480 souls. Is this a record? I was hanging out for a beer but couldn't find any. The toilets had no water. Let's get out of here. Remarkably the flight left on time and arrived in Sydney ahead of schedule. The flight was fairly full.

A pleasant Chinese taxi driver took us home. Welcome back to Australia.

A wonderful holiday that exceeded my expectations in every way...

**Steve Anyon-Smith**

67 Wattle Road Jannali 2226

tel: 02 9528 8733

mob: 0426 842 466

email: [steveas@tpg.com.au](mailto:steveas@tpg.com.au)

7<sup>th</sup> September 2014

