

Birding at Garden Island

Taveuni is Fiji's 'garden island' and home to some of its very special birds.

Garden Island Resort on the Taveuni's west coast, overlooking the narrow part of Somo Somo Strait makes the ideal base for bird-watching on the island. The resort is handy to key birding sites, has fabulously friendly staff and a beautiful setting.

The grounds of the resort and the old coconut plantation areas within easy walking distance can be very productive for a wide range of birds. For example, Vanikoro broadbill (flycatcher), collared kingfisher, Polynesian triller, yellow-breasted myzomela, Fijian goshawk, Fiji woodswallow, collared lory, Fiji white-eye and the very handsome red shining parrot (koki to the locals), purple swamphen or gallinule and buff-banded rail. From the foreshore in front of the resort brown and red-footed boobies, black and brown noddies, crested and black-naped terns and reef egret. Take a walk at night and you might see a barn owl which is common on the island. Not a bad list to get your Taveuni visit underway, and while many of these birds can be seen on other islands including Viti Levu you have the chance here for good views and great photo opportunities in fairly open situations.

You have to work a bit for the Taveuni specialties however, these can only be found in the forest areas at higher altitudes and birding from the road leading up to the transmitter towers on Des Voeux Peak is the easiest option. Although key target species such as orange dove and silktail can be seen from the road, it is within the forest itself that you'll get the best views, likewise island thrush, black-faced and Fiji (lesser) shrikebills, streaked fantail, blue-crested flycatcher and slaty monarch. The Taveuni form of the giant forest honeyeater with its striking, long, curved yellow bill (a smaller bird than the Viti Levu form with a different call), scarlet robin, barking pigeon, parrots and lorries can all be seen from the road quite easily, and golden whistlers are abundant. I've seen fan-tailed cuckoo sitting on a branch overhanging the road, and heard but not seen friendly ground dove here.

For Des Voeux Peak I'd recommend taking a guide, someone who knows the trails leading from the road (these are very basic trails and not easily found in the dense growth either side of the road or followed once you're on one of them). Boro, who works at the resort as barman, is good. Although he's a fairly quiet fellow, he does know the birds and their calls, their English names and best of all how and where to find them inside the forest. Transportation using 4X4 vehicles can be arranged through Wani of Taveuni Tours who has a desk at the resort. A pre-dawn start will see you up at the top of the road (drop off at the top gate) as the day starts to brighten. You'll be surrounded by bird calls with giant honeyeaters and golden whistlers dominant.

Expedition-style opportunities into the hinterland, for example to Lake Tagimoucia which some may be fortunate to see from the flight to Taveuni are long treks. Extensive wetlands surround areas the open water, the whole set in a caldera like crater on the summit ridge of the island, a line of small cones, peaks and razor-back ridges.

Out along Somo Somo Strait between Taveuni and Vanua Levu there is the opportunity to see some fascinating seabird action in a two-three hour boat ride west to a point opposite the southern end of Taveuni, and then slowly back up the strait late afternoon. Big fast moving groups of noddies and boobies over schools of tuna and other predator fish such as wahoo and mahi mahi can make for spectacular sights, with the massive frigatebirds chasing noddies and boobies and Pomarine and arctic skua sometimes joining the action if present. The long-winged Tahiti petrel is the most commonly seen Procellaria out on the strait, but others are possible, for example wedge-tailed shearwater and collared and Gould's petrels.

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In July 2008 a group of birders used a fishing charter boat while staying at Taveuni to go south of the island to the area near the Vuna Seamount. Here's part of Tony Pym's internet posting:

"We could charter only a high-speed sports boat and chummed the first day 18 miles offshore and the second day at the Vuna seamount. The highlight was a White-bellied Storm-petrel (a species never reliably confirmed from Fiji waters) on the first day and three Gould's Petrels on the second. Day totals were 50+ Tahiti Petrels, one Collared Petrel on the first day and 30+ Tahiti Petrels on the second - on our return to the quay at dusk we had a gathering of an additional 50+ Tahiti Petrels, waiting to return to their breeding burrows ashore. Supplementary species seen during sailings were many Red-footed Boobies and Crested Terns, flocks of both Brown and Black Noddies, Lesser Frigatebirds, a couple of Black-naped Terns and a lone Bridled Tern. We had two cetacean species; a pod of about 10 Pantropical Spotted Dolphins off Viti Levu and a Dwarf Minke Whale, feeding in the chum off Taveuni. It is evident, from the records above, the real possibilities for groundbreaking research in this marine area."