

# THE BIRDS OF SAVAI'I, WESTERN SAMOA

By SYLVIA REED

A group of 17 members of OSNZ visited Savai'i from 19 August to 6 September 1979. Participants were: D. Baker, K. Bond (organiser), E. Bowie, M. Child, P. Child, J. Clark, S. Chamberlín, P. Fooks, A. Goodwin, H. Hagen, R. Lockley, P. Millener, S. Reed, D. Russell, N. Rothwell, G. Schischka, M. Taylor.

The island of Savai'i, the westernmost of Samoa's main islands, comprises 703 square miles and lies between 13 and 14°S. Entirely volcanic, it rises to over 1800 m at the highest point, making access to the interior difficult. There are few tracks and Samoans seldom venture far from the coast where all the settlements are found. The wet season extends from November to April. The southern coasts of both Savai'i and Upolu receive two or three times more rain than the northern. At both camp sites light showers, mostly at night, were not infrequent.

From 19 to 29 August the base camp was at Palauli, in a clearing about 320 m a.s.l. above a coconut plantation. From here, small parties walked in different directions, making bird lists for the area visited. Excursions were made by bus and/or truck to Satupai'itea and beyond along the coast westwards for about 40 km. Five members, with

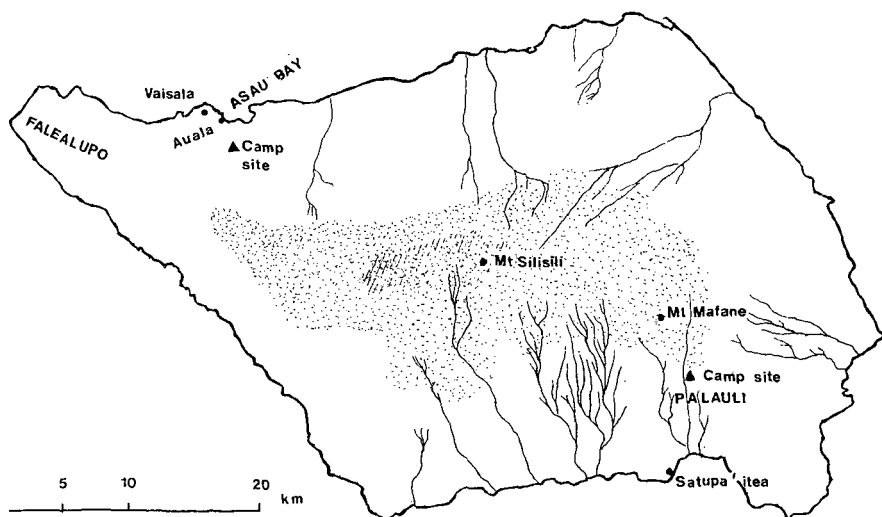


FIGURE 1 — Savai'i, showing camp sites, places mentioned in text, and main drainage pattern.

Samoan guides, made an overnight excursion to Mt Mafane (1000 m) on 23-24 August. Another long trek was part way up the track to Mt Silisili to reach about 1500 m. The forest flora on the northern slopes of Mt Silisili was noticeably different from forests at Palauli, being more lush even at the upper levels with more and larger creeping and perching plants and constant dampness underfoot.

From 29 August to 6 September, the party was based at Asau, two days on the coast, then at a Forestry Dept nursery at about 350 m. From the latter, tracks leading to various points higher were used as survey routes, including a small upper nursery at 700 m and a hut just above (about 800 m) used overnight by three of the party. One day was spent surveying the Falealupo peninsula in the north-west of the island.

Five mist nets were erected in the vicinity of the Palauli and Asau camps. The total catch was 31 birds of 10 species. These were measured, photographed and colour banded, notes being made on moult before release. One kingfisher, caught twice at Palauli, had lost the inner toe of its left foot. A Samoan Whistler was twice caught in the same net. Flying foxes (*Pteropus* sp.) were common, their appearance hawk-like.

In the following list, descriptions of plumage are purposely omitted as these are mostly covered by other authors. Table 1 represents the largest counts by one group in one place at one time; figures therefore show only *relative*, not *actual* numbers at various heights.

### SEABIRDS

Few were seen during the ferry crossing from Upolu to Savai'i. Curiously, more were sighted crossing land.

#### WHITE-TAILED TROPICBIRD *Phaethon lepturus*

Commonly seen flying over the forest and at sea from various points on the coast. One seen flying through the coconut plantation at Palauli.

#### BROWN BOOBY *Sula leucogaster*

One recorded during ferry crossing.

#### GREATER FRIGATEBIRD *Fregata minor*

Three seen when crossing from Upolu to Savai'i on 19 August. On 31 August, an extraordinary flight of about 126 passed over Asau forest between 1500 and 1600 hours. They flew from the interior to the coast in a northwesterly direction, high in the sky and, consequently, the white belly could be seen on only three. Between 0800 and 0930 on 1 September, an estimated 900+ were observed following the same flight path, much higher in the sky but still clearly distinguishable. None of the local inhabitants knew where they came from nor how often this flight occurred. Possibly the birds are largely unnoticed as their flight was so high, binoculars being necessary to identify them

TABLE 1

Species	Height a.s.l. (m)					Species	Height a.s.l. (m)							
	0 - 300	500 - 600	850 - 1500				0 - 300	500 - 600	850 - 1500					
White-tailed Tropicbird	6					Feral Pigeon	16							
Brown Booby	1					Blue-faced Lory	11	23	10	32				
Greater Frigatebird		900				Long-tailed Cuckoo	2							
Common Noddy	40	3				Barn Owl	2	2	1					
White-capped Noddy	8					White-rumped Swiftlet	100	100	50	21	8			
White Tern	12			5		Flat-billed Kingfisher	5	2	1					
Golden Plover	70					Polynesian Triller	17	15		6	4			
Turnstone	12					Samoa Triller		2			6			
Wandering Tattler	48					Red-vented Bulbul	6	2						
Grey-tailed Tattler	2					Island Thrush		2	2	2	9			
Reef Heron	10					Samoa Fantail		1	2	6				
Grey Duck	7					Samoa Broadbill	5	5						
Jungle Fowl		8	2			Samoa Robin		5	4	9	3			
Banded Rail	13	12				Samoa Silvereye								6
White-browed Rail	6	2				Giant Honeyeater								12
Swamphen	3	1				Wattled Honeyeater	50	50	20	12	12			
Crimson-crowned Fruit Dove	5	22		7	4	Cardinal Honeyeater	30	10	8	11	15			
Many-coloured Fruit Dove		5	7	4		Parrot Finch	1	4						
Pacific Pigeon	1	3	1	8	2	Polynesian Starling		20	8	2	1			
White-throated Pigeon	5	6		12	6	Samoa Starling	20	30	22	17	8			
Tooth-billed Pigeon		1												

on 1 September. The following day, a similar procession was seen, starting at 0700 hours, but the birds were much fewer. At dusk on both days, the sky was searched for about an hour but no returning frigatebirds were sighted.

**COMMON NODDY** *Anous stolidus*

Lived up to its name in being fairly common. Again, often seen flying over the tops of trees as well as at sea.

**WHITE-CAPPED NODDY** *Anous minutus*

A flock of 8 seen from the coast west of Palauli.

**WHITE TERN** *Gygis alba*

Common at sea. Many circled over the forest but none was seen to settle. On the upper level (1300 m) of Mt Silisili, the track passed a clear area (lava flow) where five were flying low from a distant dead tree. One and a half hours later, on the downward trek, the same observation was made. Possible nesting? In this area grew small blue edible berries on low bushes.

### SHORE BIRDS

**GOLDEN PLOVER** *Pluvialis fulva*

The most numerous. Often turned up on the grass of playing fields and airstrips and in unexpected places such as under the coconut palms a mile or more from the coast.

**TURNSTONE** *Arenaria interpres*

Seen in small numbers at various points on the coast.

**WANDERING TATTLER** *Tringa incana*

From a few up to 50 on rocks and lagoons. One seen flying over a creek bed on the descent from Mt Mafane.

**GREY-TAILED TATTLER** *Tringa brevipes*

Two seen off the coast at Palauli, identified by their call (PC).

**REEF HERON** *Egretta sacra*

Common, including around villages. The white phase was not seen either on Savai'i or Upolu.

**GREY DUCK** *Anas superciliosa*

Seen only in small numbers, in small coastal swamps and pools at Vaisala and Falealupo.

### LAND BIRDS

**JUNGLE FOWL** *Gallus gallus*

Rather timid and more often heard than seen, in forest and scrub, not near the coast. One seen with chicks in Asau Forest.

**BANDED RAIL** *Rallus philippensis*

Common near the coast in clearings, coconut plantations and in low-level forest. Much less furtive than in New Zealand, it was seen throughout the day. Colours possibly less contrasting than in NZ birds. Young seen at Asau.

**WHITE-BROWED RAIL** *Poliolimnus cinereus*

Uncommon. Seen in swamps of Vaisala and Falealupo. Much more timid than the Banded Rail. A dark stripe through the eye is more noticeable than the white stripe above. Like the Banded Rail, it flicks its tail while walking.

**SWAMP HEN** *Porphyrio samoensis*

The Samoan name is *manu-alii*, but *pukeko* is also recognised. Scattered individuals at different altitudes.

**SAMOAN WOOD RAIL** *Pareudiastes pacificus*

Mr Kurt Stoentzer of Apia confirmed that this species is extinct, probably since 1907.

**CRIMSON-CROWNED FRUIT DOVE** *Ptilinopus porphyraceus*

The more common of the two fruit doves. The persistent call could be heard frequently in the vicinity of Palauli and Asau Forest. One of its favourite foods is the fruit of the ylangylang tree (*Cananga odorata*). Keeps to the upper canopy. Not always easy to distinguish from the next species, in spite of its yellow-tipped tail. One was shot by a guide on the Mt Mafane trek.

**MANY-COLOURED FRUIT DOVE** *Ptilinopus perousii*

Not quite as plentiful as the Crimson-crowned but often seen closely associated, feeding in the same trees. Pink undertail coverts are a mark to distinguish the mainly green female from the female of the Crimson-crowned. Samoans hunt all doves and pigeons for food. We were told shooting is permitted only in September, October and November, but this regulation is almost impossible to police. In some parts under Forestry control, the policy has been to remove native trees and replace with exotics, most of which do not provide food for birds.

**PACIFIC PIGEON** *Ducula pacifica*

Not plentiful, and rare near the coast. Keeps very much to the top canopy. More common in wet forest at higher altitudes. Also hunted.

**WHITE-THROATED PIGEON** *Columba vitiensis*

More plentiful than the Pacific Pigeon. Seen at all altitudes. One appeared regularly over the Palauli camp site. A shot specimen was photographed by KB.

**TOOTH-BILLED PIGEON** *Didunculus strigirostris*

Only one example of this rare and endangered species was seen, by three of the party (EB, DB, HH). Notes and sketches made at the time leave no doubt as to identification. Perched on a branch 15 m up, it remained under observation for 8 minutes. The enormous hooked bill was clearly seen and also the chestnut brown of the back and the blue-grey of the breast. Mr Kurt Stoentzer of Apia, who used to keep this species in captivity, says it is suffering through loss of food trees due to sawmilling. His last bird died following a stress moult after being borrowed for several days by a National Geographical group intending to publish an article. A possible sighting of another bird at

Asau Forest could not be confirmed. It is known to the Samoans in the area below Mt Silisili forest. During the trek up to Mt Silisili, our Samoan guide claimed he saw one, but this could not be confirmed by the rest of the party.

**GROUND DOVE** *Gallicolumba stairii*

This species may still exist but was not found.

**FERAL PIGEON** *Columba livia*

16 seen between Asau and Lalamalava in the area of Sasina and Faletagaloa.

**BLUE-FACED LORY** *Vini australis*

Common in forest and plantation. Recognised in flight by its narrow curved wings with rapid beat. Calls while feeding, and in flight utters a very high shrill whistle. Often flies very high. One netted, Asau Forest.

**LONG-TAILED CUCKOO** *Eudynamis taitensis*

Only two seen once in Palauli plantation. This species is not known to call in its Samoan winter quarters.

**BARN OWL** *Tyto alba*

Heard almost every night at Palauli. Five seen in daylight at various altitudes from sea level up. Common and widespread. A dead specimen (collected for skeleton) was found in Asau Forest; one was shot in Auala village; another, alive, seen in the same village.

**WHITE-RUMPED SWIFTLET** *Collocalia spodiopygia*

Abundant everywhere, over and within the forest. Up to hundreds seen over clearings. Active all day long, especially in the afternoon until dusk when they vanish almost abruptly. Said to roost and nest in caves and lava tunnels. Never seen to alight or perch, it weaved through the understorey with great agility. At Palauli, monarch butterflies were often seen following swiftlets. A twittering call is made in flight. Rather distracting when one is trying to watch other species among the trees. One netted, Palauli.

**FLAT-BILLED KINGFISHER** *Halcyon recurvirostris*

Common. Could be heard calling on most days. The call is very similar to that of *Halcyon sancta vagans*. In the hand, the bill is softer and more flexible. Three netted, Palauli, banded green left.

**POLYNESIAN TRILLER** *Lalage maculosa*

Very common, seen at all altitudes. Several family parties observed, the juveniles paler and more brown, like females. Perches on large boulders and flicks its tail like a pipit.

**SAMOAN TRILLER** *Lalage sharpei*

Uncommon. Not seen near the coast or villages. At Palauli a nest was found (possible first record) securely placed 2-3 m up in the fork of a young pomelia tree in a fairly open situation. The nest was a deep cup, densely woven of fine rootlets, grass, cobwebs and white patches of spider cocoon material. The birds brought additional

cobwebs. The single egg was blue with reddish flecks at the thick end. Both birds incubated, changing over at 10-15 minute intervals. The male had slightly more accentuated barring on the sides of the breast. The main distinguishing character of this species is the bright yellow bill.

**RED-VENTED BULBUL** *Pycnonotus cafer bengalensis*

Present in small numbers around the coast and in villages. Seen feeding on mangrove flowers. One pair seen at 300 m at Palauli.

**ISLAND THRUSH** *Turdus poliocephalus samoensis*

A very shy bird. Not seen on the coast, this species belongs to high level forest where it is more often heard than seen. Plentiful through rain forest, alpine scrub and cinder cones. The alarm call resembles that of a European Blackbird; it also has an extremely metallic, rapid chatter.

**SAMOAN FANTAIL** *Rhipidura nebulosa*

Uncommon at Palauli and not present on the coast. Seen in the higher forest at Asau where it frequents the lower storey. The song is a soft little trill and the squeak is not as harsh as that of *R. fuliginosa*. Occasionally gives a loud, typical fantail chatter.

**SAMOAN BROADBILL** *Myiagra albiventris*

Quite common at sea level, at Asau, and around and above Palauli plantation where a nest was found perched on a horizontal branch of a hibiscus tree. Patches of white material incorporated into the rounded, cup-shaped nest of moss and lichen proved to be from spider cocoons. No eggs were in the nest. Both birds came and went frequently, with one sitting on the nest from time to time making shaping movements. Two distinct types of call were recorded, a repeated *to-eet* and a fast *cher cher cher*. Prey such as small moths and butterflies are held in the foot while being dismembered. It can hover like a hummingbird when taking prey from the underside of leaves. Two netted, Palauli; one banded red on left.

**SCARLET ROBIN** *Petroica multicolor*

Reasonably common, especially in high-altitude wet forest where it keeps to the understorey. Not heard singing at all. A nest with 3 young was found attached to the side of a slender tree trunk in the forest at Asau above 600 m. Both parents fed the young in turn and removed faecal sacs. During 30 minutes' observation, the male visited the nest twice as often as the female.

**SAMOAN WHISTLER** *Pachycephala flavifrons*

Song, which might have been expected at this season, was not heard. Females were making a soft but clear *chip chip chip*. Seen mainly in thick undergrowth along stream banks. One was mistnetted twice. Two males, two females banded black on right, Palauli; three males, one female banded black on left, one female green on right, Asau forest. One netted female had the two central rectrices in moult.

SAMOAN SILVEREYE *Zosterops samoensis*

Rare. Observed only from 900 m upwards on tops of peaks in alpine scrub. Most Samoans have never seen one.

GIANT HONEYEATER *Gymnomyza samoensis*

This, the biggest of the honeyeaters, is present only at high altitudes. Observed in an area of cinder cone, heathland scrub and the edge of the forest. Commoner on the very tops of peaks. The first one sighted was in wet forest at about 760 m.

WATTLED HONEYEATER *Foulehaio carunculata*

Abundant throughout. An aggressive species which could be heard calling loudly and seen all day long. At Palauli they also sang during the night. Often chased Cardinal Honeyeaters. A nest found about 6 m up in a hupa tree (*Adenanthera pavonina*) in the garden of the plantation house at Palauli. A pair of this species, a pair of Cardinal Honeyeaters and three whistlers were seen all fighting together. Four banded red on left, Palauli; four banded red on left, Asau forest; one had secondary coverts in moult, another had one rectrix in moult.

CARDINAL HONEYEATER *Myzomela cardinalis*

Abundant, though slightly less numerous than the Wattled Honeyeater. Seen feeding on low shrubs, flowers of coconut palm, and in tall trees with nectar-bearing flowers. One male, one female, netted Palauli, one male, Asau forest, banded yellow on left.

RED-HEADED PARROT FINCH *Erythrura cyanovirens*

Not common and difficult to see among thick foliage. Seen feeding on the ground in the open occasionally and working up a tree trunk like a nuthatch. One banded red on right, Palauli.

POLYNESIAN STARLING *Aplonis tabuensis*

Common, but not seen on the coast. Flight is direct and fast. One caught in the net was undergoing body moult, had brood patches and moderately worn rectrices. One banded red on left, Palauli. This bird was in body moult and had brood patches. The rectrices were moderately worn.

SAMOAN STARLING *Aplonis atrifuscus*

Abundant. This large starling, with a variety of calls, makes its presence known everywhere. The colour varies between black and blackish-brown. At close quarters in the bush, wing beats had a noisy *flop-flop-flop*. One caught in the net defended itself with powerful claws and bill, drawing blood from the hand of the unwary bander. One banded red on right, Palauli. Its flight feathers were worn at the edges.

JUNGLE MYNA *Acridotheres fuscus*

Not seen on Savai'i, although in considerable numbers on Upolu where it is no longer confined to Apia.

The party spent 3 days on Upolu. Fantails were much more plentiful than on Savai'i. Among some Golden Plovers and tattlers



seen behind Parliament Building at Apia were 15 Black-naped Tern (*Sterna sumatrana*) and one stint (*Calidris* sp.) on 7 September 1979.

This report is compiled from lists given by members each day and from remarks in notebooks and personal comments. I would like to thank all members of the group for their help and co-operation in adding and commenting.

## ENTOMOLOGICAL FOOTNOTE

*By Derek Russell*

The insect fauna is of no great distinction and the major groups are familiar to New Zealand entomologists. Because Samoa lies at the eastern end of a great island chain, the insects now present are derived almost entirely by island-hopping from the west. Also, since the trade winds blow from east to west in general, only the hardier and more widespread species are to be found.

Nevertheless, among the 300 or so specimens collected for DSIR and Auckland Museum (say, 8% of the known insect fauna) several species were new to science or had not before been recorded on Savai'i.

In these islands there is plenty of work for the amateur entomologist.

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## SHORT NOTE

### NEW ZEALAND DOTTEREL TAKES FISH

At Karaka, south Manukau Harbour, on 13 May 1979, I noted a group of three New Zealand Dotterel (*Charadrius obscurus*). One noticed a movement in the very shallow water, flew over, and chased a small fish. A second bird flew over but showed little interest, and then the third took up the pursuit. The fish dodged, but was caught. It must have been killed immediately because it was dropped in the water but did not try to escape. The dotterel picked it up, went on to the sand, put it down, picked it up, shuffled it about in its bill, manoeuvring it into position, and swallowed it. The fish was about twice the length of the bird's bill, c. 60 mm, and about 5-6 mm wide.

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