

SOME BIRD OBSERVATIONS FROM WESTERN SAMOA

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ABSTRACT

Some bird observations for late August-early September 1978, are summarised. The Siberian Tattler is recorded for the first time in Western Samoa and two seabirds (Crested Tern and Little Tern). A new breeding record for the Brown Booby is also described. Some brief comments are made on comparative behaviour with Fijian land birds.

INTRODUCTION

My wife and I visited Western Samoa for the three weeks 21 August to 8 September 1978, during which we spent most of each day visiting areas of likely ornithological interest.

We spent a large part of the time in the vicinity of Apia, but also visited forest margins on the hills above the town, Lake Lanoto'o, coastal areas on the north from Lufilufi to Manonouta, and the south-east from Lotofaga to Salea'aumua. We had a one-day trip by launch to the island of Manono (which we walked right around), a one-day trip by launch to the Salelologa area of Savai'i, and a three-hour visit by canoe to the eastern island of Fanuatapu.

Our reference for place names is the Lands and Survey map number 15 "Western Samoa," scale 1:200 000, 2nd ed. 1966, repr. 1977.

Nearly all birds other than ducks, pigeons and doves, which Samoans continue to hunt relentlessly with gun and "shanghai," were less afraid of man than their Fijian equivalents, and illustrated some interesting comparative behaviour patterns.

The conspicuousness of birds like the Samoan Starling (*Aplonis atrifuscus*) on tree-tops, or the Banded Rail (*Rallus philippensis*) in open spaces and on roadsides, can probably be partly attributed to the lack of predators. In Fiji, predators such as the Fiji Harrier (*Circus approximans*), Goshawk (*Accipiter rufitorques*), Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) and mongoose are widespread, whereas in Samoa the only common large predator is the Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*). As further evidence of this, the large fruit bat is relatively common during the day in Samoa, whereas in Fiji it is mainly nocturnal.

Whereas in Fiji the Island Thrush (*Turdus poliocephalus*) and Golden Whistler (*Pachycephala pectoralis*) are rather secretive shy birds in the dark recesses of the forest foliage, in Samoa they are frequently to be seen more or less in full view on fairly open branches, or even on open ground in the case of the thrush.

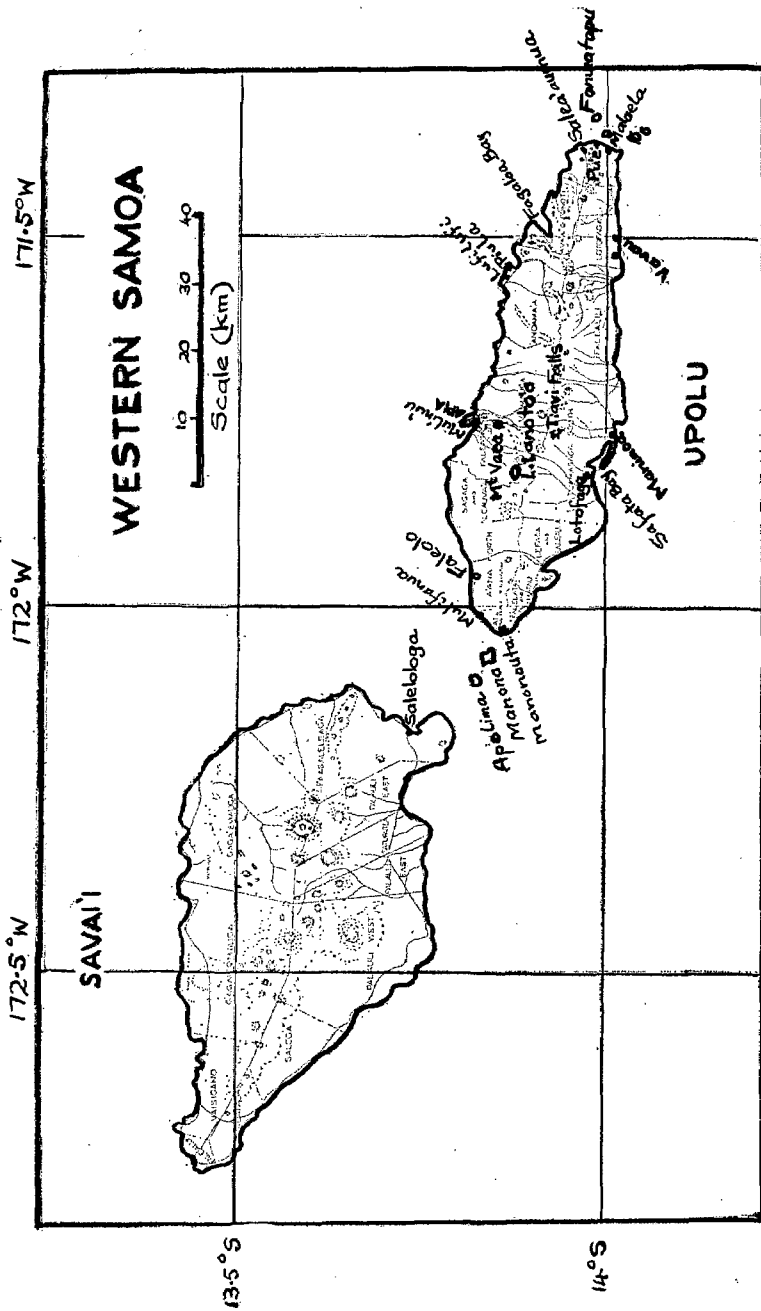


FIGURE 1 — Sketch map of Western Samoa showing the main localities named in the text.

In Samoa, the Red-headed Parrot Finch (*Erythrura cyanovirens*) is apparently associated only with shrub and forest habitats well away from civilisation, where it may be found feeding along twigs or among epiphytes, whereas in Fiji they occur not only in similar habitat but are also commonly seen on grassy suburban clearings feeding on the ground.

The Polynesian Triller (*Lalage maculosa*) is a common noisy species in both countries, but whereas in Fiji it tends to be seen in shrubs, thickets and savannah-type country, in Samoa it is also common in small flocks in gardens and grassy places, even street verges, and often feeding on the ground. So 'domesticated' is this triller in Samoa that it could be said to be occupying some of the niches filled by the House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) in similar habitats in New Zealand.

A good summary of the present birdlife on Upolu is given by Dhondt (1976), and it is not proposed to repeat those observations in a general way; we agree with most of his comments as to status and distribution, with the exceptions noted below.

To Dhondt's list of literature should be added a short paper by Green (1965).

LAND BIRDS

REEF HERON *Egretta sacra*

As Dhondt remarked, this species is common all around the coasts and occasionally slightly inland up some of the larger streams. We agree with his observations that the white phase must be very rare. Of the 38 birds we recorded, none was white. This total included observations on the islands of Manono, Savai'i and Fanuatapu.

None of our native informants had ever seen a white-phase bird.

ROCK PIGEON *Columba livia*

Dhondt commented only that this species "seems to have become feral in the Apia region." The origin of these birds is obscure, but we recorded 22 in one flock on a reclaimed flat east of Apia, 5 on a roof-ridge in the Apia wharf area, at least 2 about halfway around the coast to Lufilufi, and two singletons in different villages along the south-east coast (Vavau and Malaela).

LONG-TAILED CUCKOO *Eudynamis taitensis*

We did not record this species, although it should have been present in the hill forests at the time of our visit. It is also strange that Dhondt made no record of it during two spells of several months each. According to Ashmole (1963), it has been recorded from all islands except Savai'i.

SAMOAN TRILLER *Lalage sharpei*

Dhondt's comment is contradictory since near the beginning he states that "everybody agrees that this species is very rare," while at the end he says "it is not a common bird but is certainly not very rare."

We agree with the latter observation, having found a pair or more on each excursion to the forest margins. One morning we recorded nine birds within two hours. It seems to prefer secondary growth or the shrub layer in this habitat.

Calls heard from a pair on a tree above Tiavi Falls were a quiet *tchick* and a rather subdued *zeez-zeez*.

SAMOAN WHISTLER *Pachycephala flavifrons*

Unlike Dhondt, we found this species to be common in all types of forest, calls being heard throughout the day but especially numerous in early morning and evening. It was much less wary than its counterpart in Fiji, allowing good views on several occasions.

POLYNESIAN STARLING *Aplonis tabuensis*

Much commoner than Dhondt suggested but rather inconspicuous compared with the Samoan Starling, tending to remain under the cover of leafy twigs. It was well distributed at all altitudes from sea level to high in the mountains. On 31 August a pair in the grounds of the NZ High Commissioner was feeding young in the hollow crown of a broken tree-fern.

JUNGLE MYNA *Acridotheres fuscus*

We confirm the observation by Watling (1978) that the myna present is of this species and not the Common Myna (*A. tristis*) reported by Dhondt.

We saw only a few small groups of up to six birds in the environs of Apia, feeding on grassy clearings and on the flowers of tall trees. None was seen elsewhere around the coasts or in the hill forests. It does not appear to be "spreading rapidly," as Dhondt predicted; in fact, it seems to be rather uncommon and localised. As Watling suggested, competition with the large, aggressive Samoan Starling (*Aplonis atrifuscus*) is probably restricting the myna's colonisation of further habitat.

MARINE BIRDS

TROPIC-BIRDS

As Dhondt observed, the White-tailed Tropic-bird (*Phaethon lepturus*) was commonly seen flying around hillsides over the forest canopy and out over the coastal reef in all areas visited. Several were soaring back and forth on updraughts around Mt Vaea (near Apia) every day. On one occasion, we met two young men coming down a track from the summit of Mt Vaea, carrying two that they had caught by climbing a forest tree on which the birds were asleep (mid-morning). They tried unsuccessfully to sell them to a local hotelier who kept a small aviary containing Samoan Starlings, Blue-crowned Lories and a few others. Both birds were the same size and had full adult markings but had only one fully developed white tail "streamer," the other being about half-size. The men believed they were a pair and that the female was the one with the paler bill (pale horn colour with a greyish-yellow tinge) while the supposed male's was plain dull yellow.

The red-tailed species (*P. rubricauda*), however, appears to be rare, at least around Upolo; we could find none ourselves and none of our native informants had any knowledge of it.

BROWN BOOBY *Sula leucogaster*

On 1 September, three singletons were seen from the ferry between Mulifanua and Salelologa (Savai'i), two flying low over the waves and the third resting on a floating log near the island of Apolima.

On 4 September during our visit to Fanuatapu Island, we had magnificent close views of at least five adults and one immature as they planed about close to the eastern cliffs. On exploring the south-eastern crest, we found an adult sitting on a single egg in a rough nest on a grassy ledge a few metres below the ridge. The egg was pale watery blue, covered with a thick coat of chalky white material. According to King's (1967) list, this is a new breeding record for Samoa.

RED-FOOTED BOOBY *Sula sula*

Also from Fanuatapu on 4 September, we had good views of one adult white-phase bird and at least four or five birds of an intermediate phase. The latter were more distant than the Brown Boobies and appeared to be cruising back and forth close to the ocean surface so that it was difficult to determine exactly how many there were. Most appeared immature, with speckled upper wings and some mottling around the neck but otherwise mainly white and with white tails.

FRIGATE BIRDS *Fregata* spp.

On the morning of 31 August, three arrived at the Malifa Primary School grounds (Apia); one landed on the playing field, another settled on the branch of a tree, and the third circled overhead. We did not see these but from the description given (including whitish heads with rusty colouring) they were obviously immatures.

During the afternoon of 6 September at Piula, four were soaring high beyond the reef above a flock of fishing noddies and terns. The closest one, entirely black, was an adult male Greater (*Fregata minor*) but the others were too distant for certain recognition.

On 4 September five adult males of *Fregata minor* arrived and soared on trade winds low over Fanuatapu Island, allowing splendid viewing and positive identification of this all-black frigate bird. When we left the island about 2.30 pm, we noticed them roosting on trees overhanging a cliff on the northern side, and as we watched, a single female of this species (with black head but white throat and breast) arrived and settled on a palm frond near one of the males. The red skin of the males' gular pouches was visible but not inflated. Our canoe-men said the frigates did not breed on this island.

WHITE TERN *Gygis alba*

Common around the coasts, with large flocks seen fishing out beyond the reef, usually in the company of noddies, and small numbers over the forest canopy in many districts. Birds were often coming and going between the ocean and the forest, and so there was no possible confusion with the Black-naped Tern (*Sterna sumatrana*), which is very uncommon at Upolu. In two places on and near Mt Vaea, birds were seen to settle in trees but no nesting was observed. However, on 23 August one was seen in this area carrying a fish.

Several were seen over forest at Tiavi Falls on 3 and 4 September. According to one native informant, this species nests in forest trees inland at quite high altitude, rather than near the coast.

NODDIES

The Common Noddy (*Anous stolidus*) is the commonest sea-bird everywhere, although we could not find any breeding at the time of our visit. On Fuanatapu Island, about 90 were coming and going from the northern and eastern cliffs but no breeding was in progress.

The White-capped Noddy (*Anous tenuirostris*) is apparently rather uncommon. We saw only two for certain, over the lagoon near Maninoa on the south coast on 3 September. Another in an inaccessible niche in a volcanic cliff on Fuanatapu Island seemed to be of this species.

CRESTED TERN *Sterna bergii*

King (1967) listed this species as a vagrant for the "Samoan Islands" but I can find no record of it for Western Samoa. On the afternoon of 31 August, we found a single bird fishing on the incoming tide at the Mulinu'u inlet, west of Apia. Although the black crest was formed, the crown itself was not pure black and the upper wings were mottled grey and whitish, suggesting an immature. It caught four or five fish in a spell of 20 minutes. The same bird was still present on subsequent visits on 5 and 8 September.

LITTLE TERN *Sterna albifrons*

At the mangrove mudflat near Parliament House (see under "waders") on the morning of 8 September, a tiny whitish tern was noticed resting on the mud above the incoming tidemark among scattered turnstones, tattlers and plovers. It was approached to within 15 metres and identified as this species with its characteristic black cap and black line through the eye to the base of the bill, which itself was a light brownish-horn shade. The upper mantle and wings were light grey with a faint brownish tinge, slightly darker at the tips; rump, tail and underparts were pure white.

When disturbed, it flew off and fished for a few minutes before returning to rest again on the mud. No calls were heard. It had not been present on our earlier visits to the same area.

WADERS

Although occasional birds, especially tattlers and Golden Plovers, may be seen at almost any suitable stretch around the Upolu coast, there seem to be rather few really 'rich' wader areas. The best discovered was just west of the Parliament House at Mulinu'u, west of Apia — an area of tidal inlet with mangrove mudflat and shingle dredge scrapes which left some shallow depressions and brackish pools, with grassy areas nearby inland (visited by Golden Plovers).

Another fairly rewarding but drier, partly grassed area was just east of the town on a reclaimed flat near the Royal Samoan Hotel. A likely looking area was north from a jetty under construction along the lagoon side near the east coast village of Pu'e, although there was considerable disturbance from children, dogs and fisherfolk. From the air, Fagalca Bay looked a likely habitat, as did the peninsula on the south coast at Safata Bay.

It is certain that careful searching at appropriate seasons of these and other areas, and also around Savai'i coasts will add new species to the Samoan list. Our short visit provided one new one, as detailed below.

WANDERING TATTLER *Tringa incana*

Tattlers were as common as Golden Plovers around the coast, being found in singles, twos and threes at all places, including rocky reefs and wave-splashed boulder beaches not frequented by plovers, but not on inland grassy areas.

On 24 August at Mulinu'u Inlet, we found a flock of 73 which we guessed had just arrived on migration south, as most of them were squatting on their bellies on the mud. The biggest flock counted was at the same locality on 28 August when there were 89 at high tide.

We also saw a few on Manono, Fanuatapu and Savai'i coasts.

SIBERIAN TATTLER *Tringa brevipes*

Among the flock of *T. incana* on 24 August were at least five birds considered to be *T. brevipes* — slimmer in build, with sleek silky-grey plumage, no barring on the underparts, legs a different shade of yellow, and the diagnostic double call heard three times from different individuals. Although we studied the waders at this area on five subsequent visits, we saw no more of this species; perhaps the group moved on south in their migration, because our observations of other species showed that the flocks were changing. This is a new species for Western Samoa.

PACIFIC GOLDEN PLOVER *Pluvialis dominica fulva*

A very common wader. Singles, pairs or small flocks could be seen at almost any suitable stretch of sandy or muddy coast. They were also frequently encountered on grassy areas, playing fields and the like. Any day, up to 20 could be found scattered over about 2 ha

of grassy foreshore seawards of the busy main thoroughfare at Apia. (On one such visit there were two birds missing a right foot!) On two occasions we even had a Golden Plover on the house lawn at about 400 m (1300') a.s.l., 8 km from the coast.

The biggest single congregation recorded was on 31 August at Mulinu'u mudflat when 66 were counted on the incoming tide. It was estimated that nearly 100 singletons were dotted over the short grass surrounds of Faleolo airport runway on 9 September. During our visit these birds were in all stages of plumage, from the very palest eclipse to full breeding plumage.

TURNSTONE *Arenaria interpres*

Contrary to Dhondt's comment, we found turnstones fairly common, as follows:

- 24 August (am): Nine at Mulinu'u with Golden Plovers and Wandering Tattlers.
- 24 August (pm): One flock of 23, one of 3, and two singles in the Samoan Hotel reclaimed area.
- 28 August: 16 at Mulinu'u.
- 29 August: Three seen at one point from a bus en route to Manonouta.
- 2 September: Two flocks of 14 and 5 feeding on a gravelly reclaimed jetty area near Malacla (east coast).
- 5 September: Still 12+ at Mulinu'u.
- 5 September: One with a Golden Plover on the lawn in front of Parliament House, and another with several Golden Plovers on the grassy foreshore opposite the Chief Post Office, Apia.

Undoubtedly there were others around the coast, but as they are fairly inconspicuous when feeding among rocks and exposed reef at low tide, they have to be carefully searched for. As with Golden Plovers and Wandering Tattlers, all stages of plumage from complete eclipse to full breeding dress were noted.

BAR-TAILED GODWIT *Limosa lapponica*

Four very pale birds of this species were feeding at the edge of the incoming tide at Mulinu'u inlet on 24 August. One (presumed female) was noticeably larger than the other three, with a longer bill. They were still in the same area at the end of our visit. None was seen elsewhere.

BRISTLE-THIGHED CURLEW *Numenius tahitiensis*

Seven of these curlews were among the other waders at Mulinu'u on 24 August. They were rather more wary and less approachable than the others, possibly passing through on migration. On the 28th, only five remained in the area and by 5 September only one was left. It was still there, among the Asiatic Whimbrels, on our last visit on 8 September.

ASIATIC WHIMBREL *Numenius phaeopus variegatus*

At Mulinu'u on 5 September, seven whimbrels with pale backs and rumps were seen for the first time, associating loosely with the Golden Plovers, four godwits and the one remaining Bristle-thighed Curlew. Comparison for size, colouring and body markings were thus readily made. The characteristic "seven-whistler" calls were heard three times when the birds were flushed. Viewed in good light, the legs were noticeably bluish-grey. The length of the bill seemed to vary a little among individuals but was shorter than that of the godwits and the curlew.

While feeding, they tended to keep to themselves, wading further out into the incoming tide than the others, until water was lapping their belly feathers, and keeping a few metres apart from each other.

On 8 September at the same area, eight whimbrels were present feeding as above. At peak high tide, two of them sat down on the mud!

CONCLUSION

There is obviously plenty of scope both for the professional ornithologist and the amateur bird-watcher for further field investigation into the present status, distribution, ecology and breeding of almost all the birdlife of Western Samoa. The rather scant observations recorded over the last 25 years by Yaldwyn, Dhondt, Green and a few others have been mainly on the island of Upolu, to the neglect of Savai'i with its high mountains and forests.

Some areas needing particular attention include —

- (a) Dense primary forests — for Tooth-billed Pigeon, Ma'o, Silver-eye and others.
- (b) Swamps and drainage basins — for rails.
- (c) Coastal cliffs and groves — for seabird colonies.
- (d) Inlets and other tidal reaches — for waders and their seasonal movements.

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