

## Guide to the Birds of Fiji and Western Polynesia

Dick Watling, 2001  
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FEW taxa have suffered at the expansion of humanity to the extent of the birds of Pacific Islands. Of the 130 or so birds to become extinct as a consequence of European exploration and colonization of the Pacific, most were island birds and most were flightless rails. Not so well understood is the scale of extinctions that accompanied pre-European colonization of the Pacific islands. Only now is the paleontological record revealing the richness of the lost Pacific avifauna much of which can be put on a par with the loss of moas from New Zealand and the Dodo *Raphus cucullatus* from Mauritius in the Indian Ocean.

Watling's book is a guide to the remnants of this avifauna on the islands of Fiji and Western Polynesia, including Samoa, Tonga, Tokelau, Tuvalu, and Niue among others. In his Foreword, Grey Sherry of SPREP says that the "book is intended for everyone", but especially the youth and children of Fiji and Western Polynesia who have the ultimate responsibility for the conservation of the region's birds. Sherry also notes that the "promotion of bird conservation was identified as a high priority" at a series of workshops organized by SPREP and funded by Bird Life International and the New Zealand Government's Overseas Development Assistance program in 1999 and 2000. After reading Watling's words that there is "an almost complete lack of Pacific Islanders with ornithological interest and expertise commensurate with the conservation challenges facing the region's birds", it is not surprising that this book was an outcome of those workshops. Copies of *A Guide to the Birds of Fiji and Western Polynesia* will be distributed free to schools in the region's eight nations. Wider distribution throughout the Pacific should also be encouraged.

*A Guide to the Birds of Fiji and Western Polynesia* is more than a field guide for bird watchers, although it meets that role nicely. To meet the needs of promoting avian conservation through education, there are excellent accounts of the region's ornithology (an overview) and the conservation status and needs of the region's birds. The text begins with a brief introduction of what a bird is, how to identify birds and how to use the book. For visitors, there are capsule summaries of the major island groups which include climate, population, area, conservation and protected areas and economy. The text concludes with advice on where to find birds and how to obtain permission to visit various birding spots.

One-hundred and seventy-five bird species have been recorded from the region. This excludes the rapidly growing list of birds appearing in the paleontological record. Of the 175 species, 74 are

landbirds of which 49 are endemics. Among the land and water birds are 15 introductions, 12 of which are naturalized. Twenty-eight seabirds breed in the region. Not a rich avifauna by continental standards, but one with fascinating origins which must have involved the human hand, not only in bringing about extinctions, but in spreading birds between the islands. It is known that the Junglefowl *Gallus gallus* was an Aboriginal introduction and spread by people among the islands. I wonder if this was not also the case for megapodes. Only one megapode, the Tongan Megapode *Megapodius pritchardii* is extant, but the fossil record shows there were distinct taxa on many other islands. Is this an example of human introductions followed by evolutionary change? Why then did megapodes survive on various islands long enough to become distinctive taxa, only to be extirpated later by humans? Were different people involved? Were the extinctions a consequence of growing human population densities? Did later humans introduce new competitors or predators that the megapodes could not survive with?

Each of the 173 species with confirmed records is illustrated in traditional field guide style and the illustrations are good enough to make field identification a simple task. There are notes for another 22 species with unconfirmed records. Text accounts of species draw attention to similar species where confusion of identification may occur, but I would recommend carrying some of the other field guides illustrating seabirds and migratory waders that might occur in the region. One never knows. In addition to the illustrations, each species account provides a good verbal description of the bird, including age and sex difference, with commentary on flight, voice, habits, distribution and habitat, conservation status and some general remarks where needed.

All in all, the region has a fascinating avifauna and one well worth a visit by bird watchers. No doubt many travelers will be encouraged by Watling's book to visit the region to not only see the region's birds, but to experience the habitats and islands where the many distinctive species continue to survive. I also hope the book will encourage young people on Fiji, Tonga, Samoa and the other islands to develop an interest in ornithology and to appreciate the rich heritage of the island's natural environments. If so, the future for the region's birds may be brighter than it has been in the past.

Dick Watling and SPREP have performed a valuable service for conservation biology in the Pacific. They deserve our support and accolades. Help by putting *A Guide to the Birds of Fiji and Western Polynesia* on your book shelf and in your library. The guide is available from the author by email ([watling@is.com.fj](mailto:watling@is.com.fj)) or it can be ordered through the websites: [www.environmentfiji.com](http://www.environmentfiji.com) and [www.pacificbirds.com](http://www.pacificbirds.com). Updates of the region's birds are also posted regularly on these websites.

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