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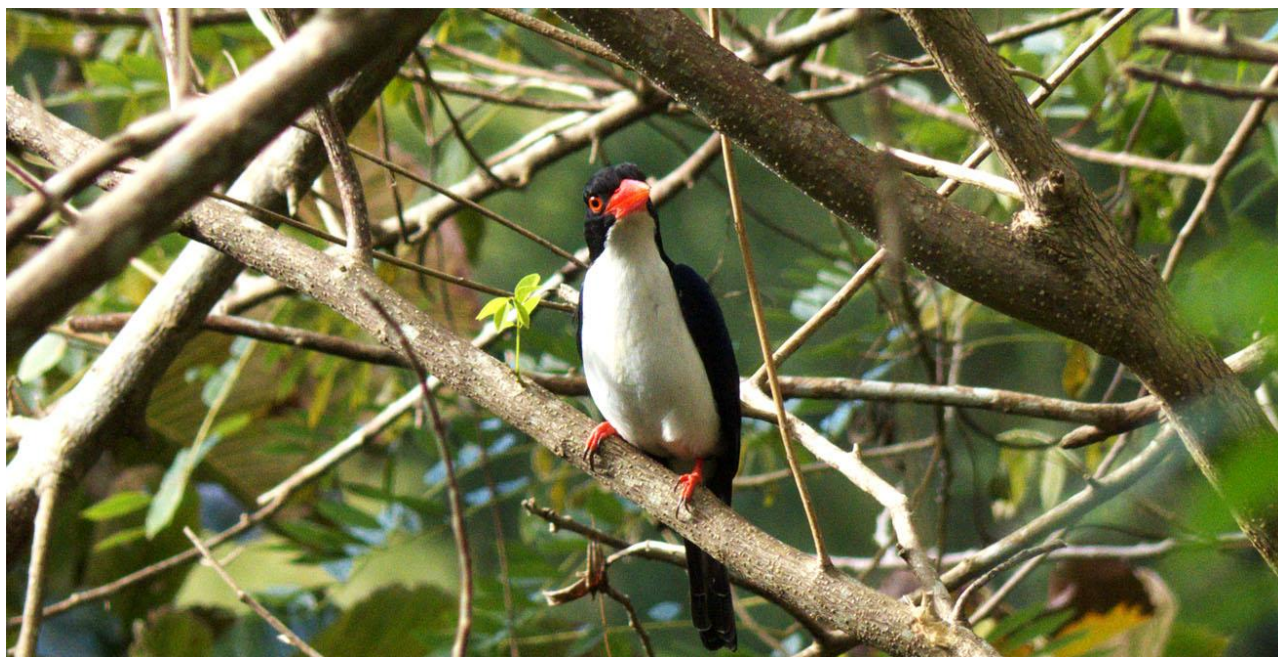


Fig. 1. A **Glittering Kingfisher**, an impressive endemic forest kingfisher of Flores and Lombok.

In June 2015, 22nd to 28th, the island of Flores, in the Lesser Sundas of Indonesia, was visited for birding, as a part of a private RTW tour, on OneWorld Global Explorer and attached regional tickets. The following text will describe how the visit was organized and conducted, for the inspiration of others who may share an interest to visit Flores. The island is often combined with Sumba but as there was not enough information on the latter, and the Sumba flights appeared to be unreliable, I opted for East Java instead (see separate report). Kuta, in Bali, was adopted as a transit base between the two trips, and also between the international flights.

Because of my RTW timetable, I had no less than five birdwatching days for Flores, and an option for an additional morning, all in all more than was strictly necessary. On the other hand, the long duration of the visit made it possible to look for an ample list of species. In retrospect, it was good to have the extra days, to compensate problems in transportation, a van with a driver.

For Flores, I had a target list of 29 bird species, out of which I expected to fail with three to four. In practice, the trip went so well, that I scored with all of them! The underlined six species can only be seen in Flores. Most of the others are Lesser Sunda endemics.

Flores Hawk-Eagle, Wallace's Hanging Parrot, Great-billed Parrot, Flores Lorikeet, Flores Green Pigeon, Flores Scops Owl, Wallace's Scops Owl, Moluccan Scops Owl, Mees's Nightjar, White-rumped Kingfisher, Elegant Pitta, Flores Minivet, Flores Crow, Flores Monarch, Rufous-chested Flycatcher, Flores Jungle-Flycatcher, Brown-capped Fantail, Flores Leaf Warbler, Bare-throated

Whistler, Russet-capped Tesia, Scaly-crowned Honeyeater, Pale-shouldered Cuckoo-Shrike, Yellow-ringed White-eye, Cream-browed White-eye, Thick-billed Heleia, Crested White-eye, Golden-rumped Flowerpecker, Black-fronted Flowerpecker and, last but not least, **Tawny-breasted Parrotfinch**.

Flores is on the beaten track of international bird tour operators, who visit the island on a regular basis. They do not, however, often go to places such as Lake Sano Nggoang, which have rich birdlife but lack in suitable accommodation. What is more, the present report will prove the feasibility of an unguided visit to Flores, by a solo visitor. Going there independently is also a more economical option than a package tour would be. It costs to have as many service staff as customers, the current practice, including up to one guide per two visitors, even though the local salaries are not as high as in tourism originating areas. This is an important aspect in today's world of widespread economic recession. Some of us have to be tight with the money, or stay home.

There currently is no comprehensive field guide available either for Indonesia or for any part of the archipelago nation, despite the fact that Indonesia belongs to the most attractive and diverse birdwatching destinations on Earth. For example, the *Birds of Wallacea* has been sold out. In that sense, Indonesia should be a publishing priority number one in the world. What is more, there is not even a reliable bird list for Flores in the Internet. The Avibase list gives an idea what to expect, but has mistakes and omissions, too. All in all, it is a challenge to prepare oneself for bird identification in Indonesia, especially if the visit is a first one in the region.

TRANSPORTATION AND TRAVEL ROUTE

Getting there and back

Denpasar airport, in Bali, is the natural gateway to Flores, because of its many international connections and frequent domestic flights. I arrived in Bali on a Cathay Pacific flight from Hong Kong and left on Malaysian Airlines to Kuala Lumpur, with a connection to Manila. The Malaysian, a former quality carrier and a current bankrupt company with increased risks of sudden cancellations, may not be around for long. For Flores, there are a few options, but I decided to play it safe and chose Garuda Indonesia. That was an auspicious decision: competitive prices, better airport facilities than with the no-frills airlines, no delays, spacious seats on ATR 72s, and great food and drinks inclusive of the return ticket price (IDR2.063.000, €132), on the 1.5 hour flights between Denpasar and Labuan Bajo.

I was also lucky to have friendly, talkative company on board, a teacher from Surabaya, and was eventually introduced to his old mother and the rest of the family, too. The flights were a great way to admire the Lesser Sunda Islands from the air, the massive volcanic formations of Gunung Tambora, Sumbawa, for example. Keep, however, in mind the unique Garuda rule on liquids: absolutely no drinks in checked baggage, even though about one liter is allowed to be taken on board! I carried in one and half liters in, and it was not a problem at all.

On arrival at the new Komodo Airport, Labuan Bajo, the first taste of Flores tourism services proved to be indicative of things to come. The airport shuttle (IDR50.000; €3.20) which had been confirmed by the manager of the L Bajo Hotel, my accommodation, was not there. According to Tripadvisor, this was not the first such case.

Instead, a local cooperative offered to organize the ride, for a few thousand rupees less. As they had no idea where the hotel was, and the driver appeared to be a learner, one of their salespersons joined us. Eventually, the correct street was discovered, and the young lady left. The driver, however, still struggled. Instead of the multistory hotel in front of us, he reversed the car to a small building next to it, pointing me to a 'reception'. The door was soon found out to lead into a living room of a private house, where the amused lady of the house was watching television news. Equally amused, I dragged my bags up the hill, and up a steep set of stairs, to the correct entrance!

For the return flight, again an enjoyable one, I got the L Bajo Hotel shuttle. This time, there were no problems because I could deal directly with the hotel reception, run by eager young women and men. I went to the airport early, to relax there and to enjoy the views, including a mysterious private jet: a Bombardier Global Express M-RIZA, registered for Isle of Man and owned by Brockville Capital Ltd of Ireland, a company exempt of audit and with total assets of one hundred euros... The last flight record for the plane in the Internet was between Perth and Jakarta, on the 18th April, 2015. How did the Bombardier arrive in Flores, and why was it parked there, one could only wonder. Birdwise, there was a **Brahminy Kite** and two **Tree Sparrows**, the latter inside the huge departure hall. It is a new airport with only few services and not many passengers.



Fig. 2. My private jet? Nope, but a mysterious case of international aviation nevertheless.

Travel route

22nd June: I woke up in Kuta at Hotel Alron, taking a metered taxi to the Denpasar airport, domestic terminal, for IDR32.000 (€2). The Garuda flight departed at 14.20 and arrived in Labuan Bajo, Flores, at 15.55. In there, I took the above-mentioned shuttle to my accommodation, tried to

reserve a room in Ruteng (Hotel Susteran) but failed, as the Susteran did not call back, as promised. I met my driver and bought drinks and food for the forthcoming five days. Night at L Bajo Hotel Komodo, Labuan Bajo.

23rd June: On the first day, we started at 5.00, driving to Puarlolo Telecom Tower area, in where we arrived at 5.45. In other words, the driving time was only 45 minutes. For the afternoon, we drove to Lake Sano Nggoang. In there, I first did a late afternoon trip at the North Valley site. An owling trip followed soon after sunset. Night at a Nunang hamlet homestay, by the lake.

24th June: A morning walk along the northern shore of Lake Sano Nggoang was extended because of problems with driver, and the plans for the rest of the day had to be canceled, too. We drove to Ruteng in 2.5 hours, including a rushed lunch break. I barely had time to visit Golo Lusang, in mist and fading light, instead of the anticipated afternoon trip to Pagal. Night at Hotel FX72, Ruteng.

25th June: Early morning visit at Golo Lusang (5.35 – 8.20). Then to Kisol, where 12.15 – 16.00, with a lunch break at Bougenville, in Borong. On the way back to Ruteng, an evening stop at Lake Ranamese was made, till after sunset. Night at Hotel FX72, Ruteng.

26th June: Morning visit to Golo Lusang, 6.00 – 9.30. A long midday rest was required after disturbed nights. A short look at a rice field behind the hotel, and an afternoon visit to Pagal, 14.00 – 17.15. Night at Hotel FX72, Ruteng.

27th June: Morning at Puarlolo Telecom Tower trail, 6.55 – 9.00. In the light early morning traffic, the driving time from Ruteng was only 1 hour and 55 minutes. A reconnaissance visit to Potawangka Road followed, on the way to Labuan Bajo. In the latter town, we went to Dolat Wetland. After a mid-day break (11.30 – 14.30), an afternoon visit to Potawangka Road was made, between 15.00 and 17.15, the early return being forced by my driver's behavior. Night at L Bajo Hotel, Labuan Bajo.

28th June: A departure to Denpasar at 13.05, on Garuda, with arrival at 14.30. An IDR95.000 (€6) airport taxi to Hotel Alron, for a rest before advancing to East Java, the next day.

Car rental, as a babysitter

The curse of Flores is the fact that even though neither the condition of the roads nor the local traffic or orientation required a local driver to help one, the drivers are forced on you, in the worst cases as a burden on the expense of the enjoyment of a vacation. I did try to find a self-drive option, but eventually gave up. As a rule, the local car rentals do not bother to reply to customer emails. The driver problem is endemic to parts of Indonesia and often brought out in independent trip reports, and also at the Burung Nusantara site, even though not as extensively as it will be discussed here. Even though it was an unpleasant task, I thought it helpful to let people to know what can be expected, if problems surface.

Initially, the emails with Mr. Ignasius Fendi, the manager of L Bajo Hotel (ignasius.fendi@yahoo.co.id), were promising. With his local contacts, he offered me a new Suzuki Arena van with an English-speaking driver for IDR800.000 (€51; €255 in total) per day, 'everything included'. The driver had received training for tourism service, a fact with kept on amusing me later on, in a morbid way. He would organize his accommodations, meals and drinks by himself, without any additional cost. R, a former bush truck driver, came to meet me at the hotel, after my request, for a discussion which appeared to confirm that he was motivated enough to work as promised, and understood the need for punctuality. I had emailed them my itinerary beforehand, to make sure that each of the listed sites could be visited.



Fig. 3. 'Truck art', Flores style. Driving a truck must be a lonely job there. See the fine road...

Unfortunately, the promises proved to be more or less empty. The driver informed me that despite the deal confirmed by his boss, he expected me to pay his daily meals. To prevent a conflict, I agreed to pay at restaurants, whenever it was possible to have a lunch or a dinner, and told him to prepare himself for other situations, just like I had done.

That was, however, not the end of it. Already in the first evening on the road, it became clear that in the accommodations, his room would be added in the rate I paid for my room. He was making the deals that way. Overall, the total cost of the car rental was consequently going to become inflated to over IDR1.000.000 (€65; €325 in total) per day. It is difficult to take a stand against such dishonesty, in the middle of a busy schedule and with no alternatives at hand. The idea had been to make a deal, which both parties would respect, and focus on birdwatching afterwards.

The feeling of having been betrayed was, however, not the primary problem. An even more serious problem surfaced in the form of inability and unwillingness to understand my needs as a birdwatching customer, despite explanations and motivational talks before each daily task. At Lake Sano Nggoang, a misunderstanding caused a three hour delay in the timetable, notwithstanding the fact that we had discussed the morning plan through three times in the previous evening, and he had agreed with every detail. At times, the man was in a good mood and did his job as requested, and some learning also appeared to occur. As I pointed to him, this was a chance to learn the sites and the ways of birdwatching tourism. Regrettably, he was not really interested.

Instead, he burdened my days by arguments based on a belief that he knew better where one should go for the birds! Much time and energy was spent discussing these matters. As an example, according to him Golo Lusang should not be visited at all, because there definitely were no birds there, after the forest had been cut down few years ago. Instead, we should visit Poco Ranaka, even though it had not a single target species for me, as I had patiently explained to him. Only after repeatedly seeing the Birdtour Asia group at Golo Lusang, with their three cars and drivers, he accepted that birdwatching could perhaps be done there, even though it still was a mistake...

His behavior deteriorated gradually. At the very beginning, he maintained a professional face. Later on, he wanted to do his own tour, with me as the paying guest. He had some complaints over each site we visited, apparently because they were not entertaining enough for him. At one point, he openly told about his hate (his word) of tourists, who should not visit Flores if they had something to complain about the local services, which should be accepted as they were, without individual requests. A load of people in and a load out, bush truck driver style... I guess he had received some feedback from previous customers, too.

Sometimes, stubborn resistance against my plans, a tail wagging the dog, initially ruined the birding. In Kisol, even though I had repeatedly explained that I was looking for a vantage point with a view to Gunung Pacandeki, for **Flores Hawk-Eagles**, and not the Hutan Alam Trail, he stubbornly took me to the trailhead, inside the forest, 'because this is the place where a birdwatcher should go'. Only after a local man told us about a viewpoint, the site I was trying to locate, he agreed to take me there.

The Potawangka Road did not appeal at all to him, and going there caused a minor revolt of speeding (almost collided with another car & went off road), driving too slowly (after my request to not over-speed on gravel), and later on, a refusal to drive at all. According to him, the site was not worth a visit. He wanted to get to Labuan Bajo instead, at once, to meet his friend in the afternoon, even though our contract had not been finished yet. After an afternoon break in Labuan Bajo, and meeting the friend, his mood had suddenly changed and there were less problems later on. I can only guess what he had done there, to calm down a volatile temper.

There was no music in the car in the beginning. Then it started, getting louder and louder. As soon as he got bored, he started to pressure me in various ways. He followed me, despite requests to not to do so before the agreed time, playing the music, engine on, behind me. At Lake Sano Nggoang and at Potawangka Road, the noise of the car disturbed bird observations too much, forcing me to stop the birding early.

Also at night, listening for owls was initially impossible because of the music. After my request, he stopped playing it, talking loudly into his phone instead, windows open. Well, at least he was not scared of the dark forest, refusing to stop the car engine and ready to jolt away any moment, like the driver of my friend Erkki Virolainen had been...

During the tour, my driver ate better than me. He also bought his water bottles at restaurants, on my expense, for double of the price I myself paid at supermarkets, the economical choice, or

helped himself to my private water reserves. As he arrogantly said, 'Money does not matter to you (tourists)'. I, on the other hand, had to save on my expenses to be able to afford his lifestyles, and to hide things from him, to be able to follow certain regime for medical reasons. There was a limit to my resources for Flores and I had to worry about not overreaching it.

All in all, babysitting a driver was a real burden in Flores, the stress adding some resilient bitterness to the visit. It would have been immensely more convenient and pleasant, not to mention safer, to do the driving by myself, as a more experienced driver than my rented driver was. He occasionally entertained himself by unnecessary risks, which I would have not taken if the car and its passengers would have been on my responsibility. He had, after all, only driven short distances locally, as a bush truck driver. I myself, on the other hand, had driven numerous cars during my lifetime, more than million kilometers in more than 100 nations. The setting was downright absurd...



Fig. 4. The rented Suzuki Arena van, parked on the Nunang village beach, at Lake Sano Nggoang.

One option to bypass the driver problems could be contacting Sam Rabenak (sam.rabenak@yahoo.com), a Flores birdguide, who may also be able to help with transportation. Sam's driver contacts probably are more familiar with birdwatching and therefore not as likely to cause problems. The basic charge would be the same as in my original deal, plus meals and accommodations for the driver, the final total probably being a bit less.

The downside was that the driver would not speak English. That could also cause misunderstandings and delays on the way. At the end of the day, a visitor would be better off without a driver, if that was possible.

(Double the money and Sam will join in, as a guide and a translator, and a person babysitting the driver, if needed. That is what the tour groups do in Flores!)

ACCOMMODATIONS AND MEALS

In Denpasar, during a transit between the Cathay Pacific flight from Hong Kong and the Garuda flight to Labuan Bajo, I stayed at **Hotel Alron**, at Jalan Blambangan 10, Kuta, for €20 – 25 per night, breakfast included. This was an Agoda deal; the regular prices are higher. Hotel Alron is a small business hotel along the one-way Jalan Blambangan, and has excellent non-smoking rooms and small restaurant with tasty, even though slightly pricey food, and fast service.



Fig. 5. A peek to a hotel bathroom as it should be; Hotel Alron, Kuta, Bali.

In Labuan Bajo, I stayed two nights at the above-mentioned **L Bajo Hotel** (Jl. Kasimo 99), in a 'double deluxe room', for €36.60 per night, without breakfast, another Agoda deal. The construction of the hotel was not yet 100% finished, but it was already good enough, and the double room was clean, spacious and comfortable. The staff at the reception was young, eager and friendly. It is a good and convenient place to stay in Labuan Bajo, also because there is a grocery store next door, in the same building. In the shop, there were also items without palm oil, not easy to find in Indonesia.

Their car rental and airport shuttle services were, however, unreliable, as already explained. There was no restaurant and therefore no breakfasts, either, but meals could be had in a simple restaurant across the street, or in fancier ones further down towards the center of Labuan Bajo. I had two meals in the nearby eatery, the price of a chicken and fried rice meals being between IDR35.000 and 50.000 (€2-3), depending on ingredients, without or with drinks. The food was tasty and also suited my budget.



Fig. 6. My L Bajo Hotel double; Spartan but stylish, even though messy after a nap.

At Lake Sano Nggoang, we stayed in rather basic hard bed rooms at a local **homestay**, for a rate of IDR420.000 (€27), according to my driver (?!). The deal included one meager lunch and a dinner for two, such as a chicken head stew. The charge was IDR120.000 higher than the one stated by the local homestay program (?!). We also had to pay a small sum to the village authorities to enter there. In regard to accommodation, there were no other choices, as a lakeside hotel was closed and no other homestays existed (?!). A toilet and a shower were in such cramped places that I was not able to enter. In other words, two days were spent without washing and with only bush toilets. That was not a big problem for me, and the old couple who had the homestay was charming. I nevertheless now understand why tour groups do not stay at Lake Sano Nggoang.



Fig. 7. Somebody in Ruteng has a good eye for interior decor; the ceiling of the Agape restaurant.

In Ruteng, there apparently was but one decent restaurant, the **Agape**. We went there every evening, and once for a lunch. The Birdtour Asia group, led by Rob Hutchinson, was met there each time in the evenings. The food, interior design and service were great and I ordered take away banana pancakes for the mornings. The meals for two persons were around IDR 90.000 (€6), very good value without alcoholic drinks. In the end, I gave a tip to the staff. They had really earned it.

In the town, we had to stay at **FX72 Hotel**, an uncomfortable 'leftover', as Mbeliling Homestay (IDR250.000; €16 per night), the current number one choice, was fully occupied by the Birdtour Asia group, I was told. The latter place also prepares breakfasts and possibly packed lunches, too. In the Internet, the response has been a positive one and I hope it will stay like that. The accommodation scene in Ruteng develops all the time and it may be a good idea to try to find out the latest situation. The bird tour companies know the best places, but prefer to keep them secret, perhaps to guarantee room availability.

I had tried to contact Hotel Susteran Ruteng (Kongregasi Santa Maria Berdukacita), but had failed, as already explained. They do not have an email and need to be phoned, the old-fashioned way. Their rooms were around IDR300.000 (€19), breakfast included, and the place was known for silence at night. In the evening, the nunnery closed its gates at 21.00. There may have been a hike in room charges in late 2015, if judged by Internet testimonies.

My driver was not helpful in contacting the Hotel Susteran on site, because they did not have 'free' (charged on the customer) rooms for drivers. At FX72, there was a shared flat, but it was not a good choice, either, because some other drivers stayed awake for the night, seriously disturbing those who tried to rest. My driver slept two hours in the first night. For his bed, I paid IDR150.000 (€9.50) for three nights, and another IDR750.000 (€48) for my private double, without breakfast.

The FX72 hotel was not expensive, but it was uncomfortable. The place was peaceful during the day but increasingly noisy after sunset, the disturbance peaking around 4.00. What is more, my first night was spent in a room without any ventilation, including its bathroom, even though ventilated rooms would have been available, as I later found out. The whole room was damp and with a persistent smell of mold.

After a complaint to the manager, I got a decent double for the remaining two nights, with regular ventilation, this time unfortunately next to a group of Muslims who spent their nights celebrating Ramadan. In the first night, I was able to sleep four hours, in the second less than six, and in the third about seven hours, but even in the best case I was woken up about ten times because of loud noises, despite ear plugs, and never reached the stage of restful sleep.

I am not a short-tempered person but in this case I really had to struggle to not to enjoy some violence against my tormentors. I had enough stress during the days as it was, and badly needed the rest. Mixing people who sleep at night, and people who do not, does not really work out well in a hotel. Overall, the accommodations outside Labuan Bajo, the choices of dictated by my driver, were not good, in terms of rest and meals.

A positive feature of the FX72 was the ripe rice field behind it. From the hotel terrace, it was possible to observe some small seed-eaters and other birds of such habitats, during the long midday break of the 26th of June. In there, I saw many **Tree Sparrows**, a *fuscicapilla* **Zitting Cisticola**, three *lineocapilla* **Golden-headed Cisticolas**, a *flavidiventris* **Red Avadavat**, and about 15 **Black-faced** and 10 *nisoria* **Scaly-breasted Munias**.



Fig. 8. A FX72 toilet from hell: no ventilation, wet crumbling concrete, metal door and mold, in the ceiling, in particular. Every surface was damp.



Fig. 9. The better side of FX72; the rice field behind it, and a view to the Ruteng Valley. The hotel has a good location and could easily be improved by minor repairs and improved customer management.

BIRDS AND SITES

Puarlolo Telecom Tower Trail

As mentioned, the site is 45 minutes (36 km) east of Labuan Bajo. Do not enter the track which goes up to the telecom tower. A more productive trail starts behind an aqua rest area shelter, 300 meters earlier, on the right (south). The telecom tower appears first when one approaches the area. The trail enters a broadleaved high altitude forest and keeps on running downhill. Personally, I stayed within the first 250 meters, first down and then right, until a thick trunk of a tree blocked the path, which started to deteriorate there. As the key species prefer high ground, it made no sense to walk further downhill. The Puarlolo trail was, by the way, the only site in Flores where it was possible to observe the birds completely in peace, without any disturbance.



Fig. 10. The Puarlolo trailhead, with the telecom tower in the horizon.

It is a site where slow walking and silent observation, including frequent stops, make sense. The diversity of endemic species was surprising. After the first visit, on the 23rd of June, I had already recorded 16 out of my 29 target species, more than half of them. The first target species were seen right by the rest area, which appeared to be particularly productive very early in the morning, at sunrise, when the lower forest still remained in shadows. The best birds at first light were a **Pale-shouldered Cicadabird** and a male **Little Minivet**. Ten **Wallace's Drongos** dominated the site by their morning chatter. My first **Flores Green Pigeon** was, however, observed there just before departure, late in the morning. The species has been relatively regular at Puarlolo during the past few years.

Inside the forest, *concinna* **Elegant Pittas** were very common, with 15 birds heard in the limited area, but seeing one proved to be too difficult at that point. First, I had to focus on more challenging species, knowing that there would be a chance to see the pitta later on. Six

gracilirostris **Glittering Kingfishers** were heard and two seen, albeit only flying past. A party of three **Wallace's Hanging Parrots** was a nice surprise, as I had expected to see the species only towards the end of the visit, at Potawangka Road. In the next few days, it became clear that there had been some dispersal, perhaps in search of some seasonal food sources.

The main target species at Puarlolo was the **Flores Monarch**. In the first morning, I only managed to see it once, a bird moving across the trail in front of me. The other difficult to see species was the **Rufous-chested Flycatcher**, a male of which fortunately gave cracking views in the area just before a turn to the right, staying close to the ground in the young edge forest. More modest inhabitants of the site included a **Brown-capped Fantail** and at least ten **Russet-capped Tesias**, a species which proved to be both common and widespread in Flores, and easy to see, as well.

The *subcristatus* **Crested White-eyes**, on the other hand, were surprisingly scarce, with only three birds observed at Puarlololo, during the first visit. **Thick-billed Heleias** were more common (about 15) and I also managed to see two **Yellow-ringed White-eyes** there. My two **Flores Jungle Flycatchers** were the only records of the species on the trip. At the edge of a small but sunny opening inside the forest, one **Golden-rumped** and three **Black-fronted Flowerpeckers** were seen.



Fig. 11. Peekaboo! Flores birds know how to hide in the forest; another **Glittering Kingfisher**.

All in all, birding was wonderful at Puarlolo. I did, however, injure my leg on the path. Somebody had left a small tree across the trail, having only cut some of the branches with a machete. It looked, however, easy enough to walk through. When stepping across the 'trap', one of the branches nevertheless caught my shoe and a sharp tip of another one cut a sizable wound in my leg. This could easily have developed into an infection, just like I had experienced twice before, and forced an early return home, on the second week of a seven week RTW tour. Sick of worrying, I cleaned the wound on a regular basis and sought extra bandages and iodine solution at Ruteng and Borong pharmacies, with some success. I had antibiotics with me and immediately started to take the pills, even though they had not helped in the previous cases (Hainan, Maui).

Each day could be my last one in Flores and each change of bandages therefore become a moment of truth. Fortunately, the infection never occurred, against the odds. After a week, already in the Philippines, I finally concluded that I was safe. The skin had healed, after all. Later on along the route, in California, I injured my knee equally badly, but escaped the infection again.

The second visit was made on the 27th of June, between 6.55 and 9.00. The visit was such a success, that there was no need to stay longer. This time I had time to lure an **Elegant Pitta** into a close view by a mp3 recording (thank you, Xeno-Canto!), in a situation where the territories of three pittas met. By moving my recording across the path, I managed to create an impression of a trespassing neighbor, with immediate results. Also a **Flores Monarch** appeared at the above-mentioned **Rufous-chested Flycatcher** spot, in which I sat on ground, on some large leaves, and could watch the modest monarch at a close distance, for a prolonged period.

Other birds recorded at the site were: seven **Ruddy Cuckoo-Doves**, *sasakensis* **Dark-backed Imperial Pigeons**, one *sumbawae* **Glossy Swiftlet**, two *grandis* **Sunda Pygmy Woodpeckers**, a **Golden-bellied Gerygone**, one male and two female **Rusty-breasted Whistlers**, one **Mountain White-eye**, three *broderipi* **Black-naped Orioles**, an *everetti* **Mountain Tailorbird** (without a tail!), six *rhodopygiale* **Blood-breasted Flowerpeckers** and one *teysmanni* **Olive-backed Sunbird**.



Fig. 12. The 'trap' on the Puarlolo trail. After my accident, I cleared the path. The photo was taken to commemorate the worst abortion of a RTW bird tour ever, if the leg inflamed...

Lake Sano Nggoang

The lake is located some 15 km south of the Ruteng highway, as a crow flies. From the Puarlolo trail entrance (rest area), drive exactly one kilometer back towards Labuan Bajo, and turn left to a smaller road to the lake (not signposted). The drive to the northwestern corner of the lake is

roughly about 17 km, with one left and one right turn in the beginning (both Y-junctions). Along this road, I saw my first pair of **Golden-rumped Flowerpeckers**, in addition to widespread generalists, such as **Spotted Doves**. At the above-mentioned corner, there is a third Y-junction. Turn left at the junction, and follow the shoreline for 3 kilometers, to the Nunang village, if wishing to look for accommodation there. Some of the best birding is right below the Y-junction, in a north-south valley with a stream, named North Valley for this report.

Alternatively, one could stay in Labuan Bajo and commute from there. The one way drive is, after all, 'only' 1.5 to 2 hours. During the dry season, the gravel road was fine except at one spot half way to the lake, and towards the very end of the road, next to the Nunang village, of some 250 people. At the former spot, I proposed to push a stone into the deepest depression, to avoid us from damaging the bottom of the Suzuki. My driver, however, preferred to crash through, with hits. At the latter place, he nevertheless refused to drive the last three hundred meters on the rough road. A short cut on the beach was impassable, as well. We therefore had to walk the last 150 meters to the accommodation and back.



Fig. 13. The crater lake of Sano Nggoang; very deep and highly sulfurous.

The volcanic Lake Sano Nggoang, a crater full of water, is too acid for fish to survive, and it smells of sulfur. It is said to be some 600 meters deep. One day, there could be an eruption? In the morning, the site was cold, only +10 C. After sunrise, the temperature did, however, improve fast. It is nevertheless important to bring enough clothes for the high altitude sites of Flores. There may be mist and/or rain, too, and catching cold is a possibility unless one is prepared. Flores is not as tropical as one might expect it to be. On the plus side, one does not need to sweat there either, except on the coast, during the hottest mid-afternoon hours. The climate is comfortable.

In the first afternoon, 23rd of June, I birded the North Valley area and walked on the shoreline road, between 15.30 and 17.30, despite the resistance (my driver). After a dinner, a night drive followed, to the North Valley and about one kilometer beyond, between 19.20 and 21.40. In the next morning, 24th of June, I walked from Nunang to the North Valley at 5.45. My driver was supposed to follow me at 9.00, after a long morning sleep and a breakfast. In practice, he stayed in the car, without moving. I sent a message to him, with some men riding motorbikes towards the village. At 11.00, he arrived, without our luggage! We had to return to the village to collect it, and could leave only at 11.45. As agreed in the previous morning, my bags were fortunately packed and ready to go.

At the lake, a number of ducks had found a refuge. I saw some 100 *rogersi* **Pacific Black Ducks** and up to 40 **Lesser Whistling Ducks**. There were also more than 200 **Glossy** and about 100 *dammermani* **Edible-nest Swiftlets**, and a *celebensis* **Blue-tailed Bee-eater**, together with some 20 **Rainbow Bee-eaters**, who had arrived from Australia to spend the southern winter there. A lone **Russet-capped Tesia** visited the edge of the water and showed exceedingly well. Two *leucomelana* **White-breasted Waterhen** had also managed to establish a breeding territory there, in the barren lakeshore habitat. A handsome adult **White-bellied Sea Eagle** arrived to see if the lake still lacked in fish, but had to leave with empty talons, disappointed.

At the North Valley, there were two pairs of **Glittering Kingfishers** which I tried to see, eventually succeeding to get close, perched views. Four and one **Wallace's Hanging Parrots** were added to my site list and, more importantly, a total of ten (8+2) beautiful **Flores Lorikeets**, my first records out of three in Flores. The best birds were, however, a pretty and vocal pair of **Flores Crows**, their calls reminiscent of **Cuban** and **White-necked Crows**. A third crow called further away in the valley. A lone **Yellow-ringed White-eye** was also tame and great to watch in the afternoon sun.

Other birds there included an adult **Brahminy Kite**, several **Dark-backed Imperial Pigeons**, one *metallica* **Metallic Pigeon**, **Ruddy** and **Little Cuckoo-Doves**, a **Pallid Cuckoo** (Ozzie visitor), two **Black-faced Cuckooshrikes** (another Ozzie visitor), *neglectus* **Helmeted Friarbirds**, **Wallace's Drongos**, a male **Rusty-breasted Whistler**, five **Black-naped Orioles** and one **Short-tailed Starling**. Dozens of **Long-tailed Macaques** favored this area of fresh water and lush vegetation, too.

Close to the Nunang village, two **Black-fronted** and one **Blood-breasted Flowerpeckers** were observed, in a bush next to a bus stop shelter. A **Besra** of the endemic subspecies *quinquefasciatus* was sunning itself on top of a dead tree, at sunrise. Along the lakeside road, up to four **Common Emerald Doves** were foraging and a *sylvestris* **Variable Goshawk** was observing them. **Ruddy** and **Little Cuckoo-Doves** could be heard and seen here and there, in addition to two *albocinctus* **Banded Fruit Doves**. A total of eight **Glittering Kingfishers** were heard but none were seen. **Elegant Pittas** were surprisingly scarce, with only two heard.

In the roadside trees and bushes, I saw a total of eight *floris* '**Oriental Paradise Flycatchers**' (white males), two *symmixta* **Black-naped Monarchs**, several **Russet-capped Tesias**, two **Indonesian Honeyeaters**, several **Helmeted Friarbirds**, **Wallace's Drongos**, four **Golden-bellied Gerygones**, 11 **Olive-backed** and three *exquisitus* **Flame-breasted Sunbirds**, together with about 10 **Black-**

fronted and three **Blood-breasted Flowerpeckers**. A number of **Long-tailed Macaques** were also encountered there.



Fig. 14. Early in the morning, a **Variable Goshawk** was waiting for its breakfast to be served.

During the owling trip, in ideal conditions (calm and clear), a total of no less than 12 **Moluccan Scops Owls** were located, the first two birds right by the village. One of them called few times after sunrise, too, at the North Valley. Soon after our return in Nunang, the weather changed. It started to rain, with wind. **Wallace's Scops Owl** was rare, with only one male half way towards the North Valley, next to the lake shore. **Flores Scops Owl**, the number one target species, was not quite as scarce, with four individuals along the route! There were also two birds calling like a boobook, any species of which should not occur in Flores in June, as far as I know. Moreover, there were a number of huge **Lombok Fruit Bats** and about 15 **Woolly Horse-shoe Bats** along the lakeshore, both easily observed at my headlamp light.

Along the fast drive to Ruteng, a lone **Eastern Cattle Egret**, two **Spotted Kestrels** and a **Barred Dove** (in Ruteng) were added to the Flores trip list.

Golo Lusang

The well known pass is located 8 km south of Ruteng. Drive south, past Cathedral Maria Immaculata, on Jalan Pelita, and continue forward. On top of the pass, there is a viewpoint with a rest area. The upper slope is mostly cleared of trees but has heavy undergrowth. Birding is done by walking the meandering road down. Personally, I did not walk more than two kilometers, or less, because I was after the high altitude species. The Birdtour Asia people went further down, apparently because their 'shopping list' was a more extensive one. The lower section is also good for **Flores Scops Owls**. The road is narrow and relatively busy, but the local commuters seemed to be used to birders lurking behind the corners. It is nevertheless important to give the cars and the motorbikes as much space as possible, for the sake of personal security.

On the 24th of June, I visited the site between 15.30 and 17.20. Mist rises from the valleys in the evenings and birding regularly becomes next to impossible towards the sunset. Mornings, on the other hand, tend to be clear. The next day, I was there between 5.35 and 8.20, before a drive to Kisol. On the 26th of June, the visit was conducted between 6.00 and 9.15. After the third visit, I could not hope to see anything new there, and the site was left in peace.



Fig. 15. A view at Golo Lusang, late in the afternoon, when the mist rises up from the lowlands.



Fig. 16. A female **Small Minivet** struggles with a tough piece of food, a feisty caterpillar.

A number of scarce and endemic species were recorded in Golo Lusang. A nice **Pink-headed Imperial Pigeon** was scoped on top of a dead tree, in the low part, a scarce resident in Flores and probably only a visitor at this altitude. A total of eight **Scaly-crowned Honey-eaters** were seen

higher up, at their stakeout, as well as seven **Cream-browed White-eyes** (surprisingly scarce) and five **Thick-billed Heleias**. **Little Minivets** were common in edge habitats, with a total of 20 birds.

Two **Brown-capped Fantails** were located, with ideal views of the first one. Eleven **Flores Leaf Warblers** were observed in the roadside brush. Last, but not least, there were at least nine singing **Bare-throated Whistlers**, but they were awfully difficult to see well, even at sunrise. The song reminded me of solitaires, on the other side of the globe.

The best bird was, however, a single *intermedia* **Tawny-breasted Parrotfinch**. It crossed the road in front of me, about 150 meters down from the viewpoint, and flew upslope just above the low but dense bamboo vegetation, landing and disappearing into it. Luckily, I was fast enough to follow it by bins and the focus happened to be just right!

At that point, I had passed the spot five times, without an idea that parrotfinches could be there, even though the area is a known site for them. The parrotfinches are silent and skulking, and could be present most of the time, but one needs some luck to actually see one. I was told that happens in Golo Lusang approximately every second or third year. In the end, it paid to spend most of the Golo Lusang time in the upper bamboo section of the road!

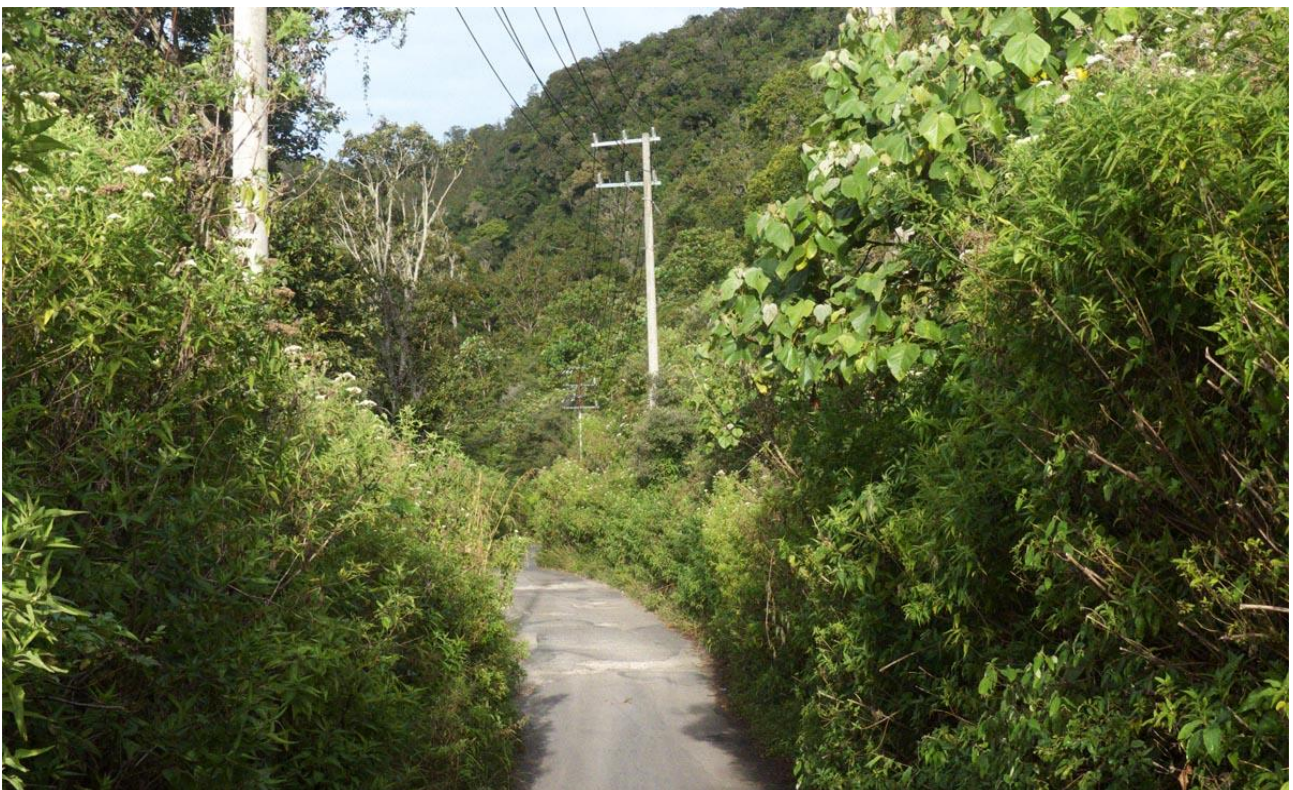


Fig. 17. Lower down, the Golo Lusang road is narrow indeed; look for the passing local buses!

In addition, I saw or heard a **Barred Cuckoo-Dove**, *polia* **Green** and **Dark-backed** (common, more than 15 scoped and others heard) **Imperial Pigeons**, a **Metallic Pigeon**, a **Banded Fruit Dove**, a **Shining Bronze Cuckoo** (visitor from the Oz), a few **Glittering Kingfishers** (lower down), an **Elegant Pitta**, **Glossy** and **Edible-nest Swiftlets**, four *subfurcatus* **House Swifts** (scarce in Flores), one **Blue-naped Flycatcher**, **Russet-capped Tesias**, two *floris* **White-browed Shortwings**, an *everetti* **Pygmy**

Wren-babbler, a **White-shouldered Triller**, two *floris* **Yellow-breasted Warblers**, many (>100) **Mountain White-eyes**, five **Olive-backed Sunbirds** and a *convergens* **Brown-throated Sunbird**.

There were also **Long-tailed Macaques** at Golo Lusang, with a distinctively woollier appearance than their lower altitude cousins had portrayed.

Kisol (Gunung Pacandeki)

The site is 66 km southeast of Ruteng, along the highway to Ende, east of Borong. In Kisol, I had only one target species, the **Flores Hawk-Eagle**, and therefore concentrated on locating a good viewpoint to scan the slopes a Gunung Pacandeki, their known haunt, on the June 25th visit. Unfortunately, the available Internet trip reports did not give proper guidelines on how to locate the lookout, beyond informing that it existed.

My driver was born in the area, but worse than useless as a guide, as described above. As the time was running out, I first requested a stop at a football field, and tried to score from there. The next try, at a school yard higher up, immediately produced the first **Flores Hawk-Eagle**, a female which crossed the village from north towards Gunung Pacandeki, at 11.15. At the school, closed for a vacation, I explained my needs to the people gathering around us. A young man immediately understood what I was looking for and explained a route to the well known scenic spot with a full view of Gunung Pacandeki, and the driver finally took me there, five minutes away.



Fig. 18. A view from the Gunung Pacandeki viewpoint; a good place to spot a **Flores Hawk-Eagle**.

The driving directions to the viewpoint are: after the Kisol Catholic Seminary junction, take the second road to the right and drive straight on, until a hill with good views to the south and Gunung Pacandeki are reached, two kilometers later. Alternatively, turn right at the seminary junction,

driving past the school (right) and a football field (left), past one junction to the left and one to the right (to the Hutan Alam trail), and turn right at a T-junction, proceeding 600 meters to the viewpoint.

The first gravel road route to the viewpoint was in good condition, much better than the rough road to Hutan Alam Trail, on which we had wasted the best morning hour. I scanned the slopes from the viewpoint site twice, first 12.15 – 13.00 and then again between 15.00 and 16.00, after a lunch break and a visit to a pharmacy. At the lookout, I climbed five meters above the road and sat there with my scope, in the company of some biting ants, to be able to rest my injured leg. Interestingly, the people walking or cycling on the road never noticed me there, even though I was in a full view, close to them! They watched their step and one another, never looking up.

In there, a solo male **Flores Hawk-Eagle** was seen at 15.15, gliding from Gunung Pacandeki towards the coast. The other observations included a **Besra**, **Spotted Doves**, a fly-by **Flores Green Pigeon**, **Ruddy** and **Barred Cuckoo-Doves**, two **Common Emerald Doves**, hundreds of **Glossy** and **Edible-nest Swiftlets**, a *pacificus* **Oriental Dollarbird**, several vocal **Glittering Kingfishers** and **Elegant Pittas**, a **Wallacean Drongo**, a **Flores Crow**, **Russet-capped Tesias**, about 10 **Yellow-ringed White-eyes**, a **Black-fronted Flowerpecker** and a **Five-colored Munia**. Not bad, considering the meager time left for observations.



Fig. 19. Bougenvile, a Borong bakery and a lunch stop, with some local vehicles.

Danau Ranamese

I visited this well known lake, the only obvious one in satellite images, 20 km southeast of Ruteng along the Borong/Ende highway, only to see if it was still suitable for owling. The first 5 km of the road towards Ruteng have previously been recommended for this activity. The situation was

tested by waiting for sunset there, admiring a **Glittering Kingfisher**, and listening for owls and nightjars afterwards. The answer was a definite no, in regard to the highway. The traffic was simply too heavy. There was not a single completely silent moment for one hour, between 17.20 and 18.20. Trucks, vans and smaller vehicles were struggling uphill, emitting loud noises.

In between the loudest disturbances, I could, however, hear a calling **Mees's Nightjar**, south of the rest area, and also a single **Flores Scops Owl**, towards a forested slope on the other side of the highway. The owls have also recently been seen along the trail to the lakeshore. The owls and the nightjars are there, but it is not the best area to listen for them. Kisol, Potawangka Road and perhaps Labuan Bajo are the best for the nightjar, and the owls can best be observed at Lake Sano Nggoang and at Golo Lusang.

Pagal

The site is located about 20 km north of Ruteng, on the road to Reo. The birdwatching occurs on tarmac, by walking on the fine highway which meanders on a forested, sunny and therefore warm mountain slope 2 to 6 km beyond the village of Pagal (in Hindi, 'crazy'!). The forest may be a bit degraded but nevertheless supports some sought after species. I went there only once, on the 26th of June, between 14.00 and 17.50, and was soon joined by the Birdtour Asia team, who had already been there before.



Fig. 20. The Pagal site; walk on the level road and check the edges of the forest. Traffic was light.

Among the target species one may expect to see in Pagal, I observed a **Flores Green Pigeon**, my third records of this scarce species during the visit. Three **Wallace's Hanging Parrots** could also be closely observed and I saw my third party of **Flores Lorikeets**, a pair, there. A pair of **Flores Leaf Warblers** had their nest by the road. At that point of the journey, the best bird was, however, a

Chestnut-backed Thrush, which crossed the highway, first stopping at the edge, to see if there was any traffic approaching!

I had not been looking for thrushes in Flores and this was my only observation of the family there. I guess I had heard them, but not consciously. With a certain 'shopping list' in one's hand, the observation tactics easily become biased. One tends to see the target species and a random selection of others, which happen to be encountered while hunting down the ones on the primary list.

The rest of the birds observed in Pagal were a resident pair of *renchi* **Bonelli's Eagles**, **Glossy Swiftlets**, an **Asian Palm Swift** (circling a palm!), two **Glittering Kingfishers** (heard only), two **Indonesian Honeyeaters**, **Black-naped Orioles**, **Wallacean Drongos**, two **Striated Swallows**, **Russet-capped Tesias**, a **Yellow-breasted Warbler**, three **Yellow-ringed White-eyes**, an **Olive-backed Sunbird** and a **Black-fronted Flowerpecker**.

I am not sure what the official status of **Asian Palm Swift** is in Flores. According to some sources, they do not occur there, according to some others, they do. There definitely are recent records from Sulawesi and Timor, in addition to the main distribution in the west, from Bali onwards. My record, which indicated a possible nest site, points towards an extant species. As brought out in the introduction, there is no proper guidebook for the region, for a reference of the species and their distribution, and there are gaps in knowledge, too. I would not be surprised if a totally new species lurked somewhere in the island, as well, in the light of the recent discoveries in Sumba.

An overlooked owl, perhaps?

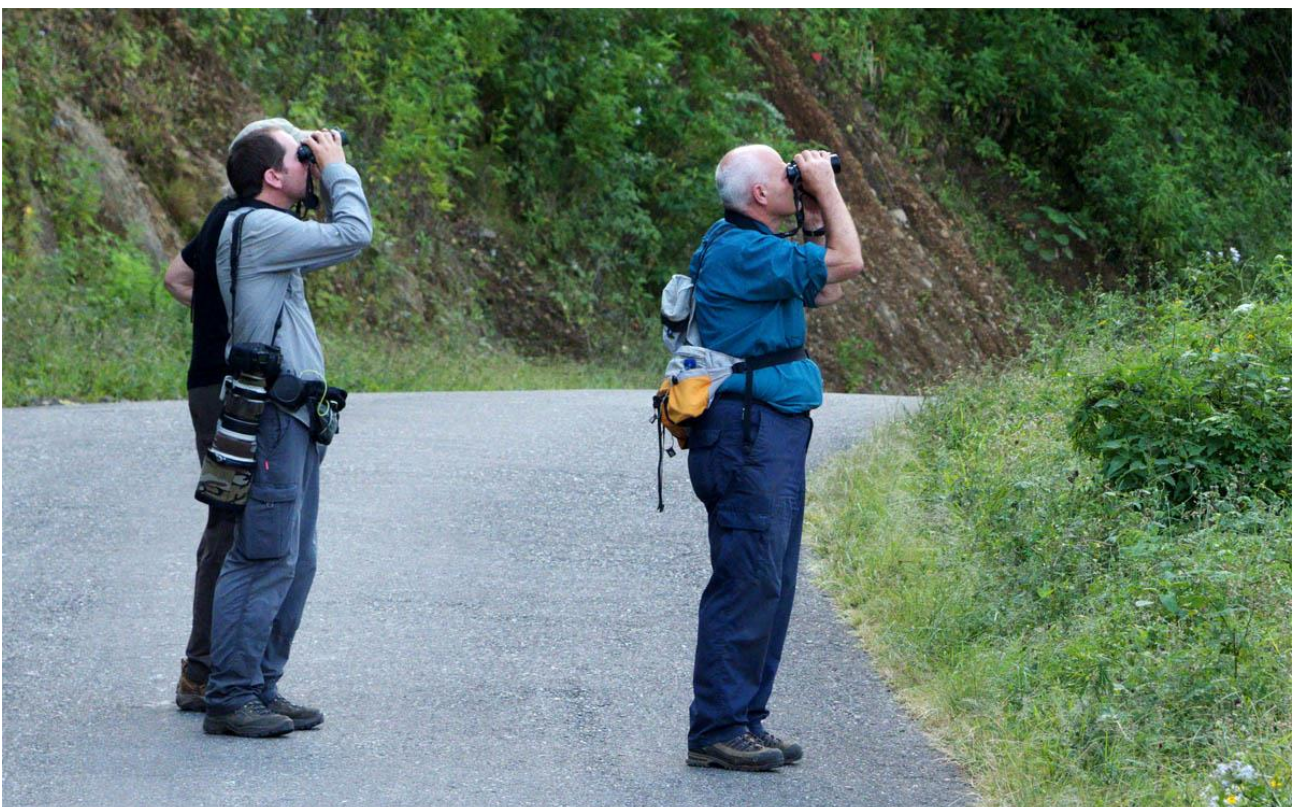


Fig. 21. Looking for **Bonelli's Eagles**, I guess? The Birdtour Asia people at Pagal.

Dolat Wetland

The site is located on the coast, south of Labuan Bajo. Follow the coastal road (tarmac) past Hotel Laprima and Bintang Flores Resort, and keep on driving until small wetlands start to appear on either side of the road. We did not drive farther than to the first Muslim village, where a U-turn was made. During the June 27th visit, between 10.15 and 11.15, the area was mostly dry, with a few leftover ponds along the water channels and at the edge of coastal mangroves. The few remaining wetland birds concentrated at these sites, together with some cute mudskippers.

The herons and egrets included two **Javan Pond Herons**, two *manilensis* **Purple Herons**, two *modesta* **Great Egrets** and one dark phase **Pacific Reef Egret**. An **Intermediate Egret** and two **Eastern Cattle Egrets** had been seen between the Potawangka Junction and Labuan Bajo. The smaller birds were a **Horsfield's Bronze Cuckoo** (from Australia), three **Blue-tailed Bee-eaters**, a party of eight **Large-billed Crows** (coastal in Flores), two *javanica* **Pacific** and about 15 **Striated Swallows**, two **Broad-billed Flycatchers**, a **Clamorous Reed Warbler** (taxonomy unclear), two **Yellow-ringed White-eyes**, two **Olive-backed** and one **Flame-breasted Sunbird**, and four **Scaly-breasted** and one **Pale-headed Munia**.

Time permitting, on a self-drive journey, it would have been possible to approach the area along the coast, to observe the best mangroves and mudflats. The hotels in this area have the edge of interesting garden birding. For example, **Elegant Pittas** can be seen in the coastal scrub and forest right next to them, to mention one good species. No wonder for example Bintang Flores Resort has been favored by bird tour groups.

Potawangka Road

The Potawangka Road enters the Ruteng highway from the north, about 10 km east of Labuan Bajo, a 15 minute drive. The productive forest is between 3 to 8 kilometers from the junction. For the most of the distance, it was a fine tarmac track. Beyond km 8, the road deteriorated and was not suitable for a van anymore. There had been floods there, and too many heavy trucks.

The site was visited twice on the 27th of June; first, a reconnaissance tour between 9.20 and 9.45, to see what should be done in the afternoon, and second, an afternoon visit with a long walk, between 15.00 – 17.15. I had actually wished to stay till 18.30, for a **Mees's Nightjar** (a grassy opening along the road is a stakeout), and had agreed to leave at 17.30, but my driver managed to coerce even the latter plan, disturbing the birding and forcing an earlier return. At that point, I must admit I was also counting minutes to get away from the stressful relationship.

Before the final departure, I had scored with my last missing target species, the **Great-billed Parrot**, and was in a celebratory mood. 29/29!! I first heard one parrot in a distance, in the afternoon, and a play of a recording brought in a close-by pair, for good (and noisy!) views. The parrot is not so easy to locate anymore, despite its relatively extensive island distribution in South-East Asia. Most of these places are not that easy to visit.



Fig. 22. The Potawangka Road, mostly surfaced with good tarmac.

The other birds recorded by the road were an **Orange-footed Scrubfowl** (excellent views), a **Green Imperial Pigeon**, a **Black-naped Fruit Dove**, three **Common Emerald Doves**, **Glossy** and **Edible-nest Swiftlets**, one vocal **Glittering Kingfisher**, about 10 **Blue-tailed Bee-eaters**, six **Black-naped Orioles**, two **Indonesian Honeyeaters**, two **Helmeted Friarbirds**, a **Wallacean Drongo** devouring a huge green insect (a leaf insect?), one **Broad-billed Flycatcher**, two **Russet-capped Tesias**, and two **Olive-backed** and three **Flame-breasted Sunbirds**. Late afternoon is said to be the best time to visit the Potawangka Road.



Fig. 23. The attractive **Flame-breasted Sunbirds** were pleasingly widespread in Flores.

The forest had many **Wild Boar** and I managed to scare a total of five out of roadside ditches. People driving on the road have no idea that they were there, so close to the moving cars. One of

boars was a particularly funny case, running out and freezing, snorting and inhaling air, when it tried to locate me. I was standing quite close, in an open view, but the smell of a human had overwhelmed the poor boar, who could not decide which way to run!

AT THE END OF THE DAY

Flores was a destination of great contrasts. The birds were just wonderful and I also enjoyed the landscape. For me, the best sites were the Puarlolo Trail and Lake Sano Nggoang, Golo Lusang being number three, despite ample disturbance by the local traffic. In terms of target species, my potential lifers, the visit was a resounding success, with 29 out of 29 species discovered. If I could have traveled by myself, I would have spent many more hours out in the nature.

On the one hand, there were too many cases of no response, deals which were not respected and disappointments such as the FX72. Being forced to babysit a driver with an attitude problem spoiled much of the experience. On the other hand, the L Bajo Hotel was not bad, the supermarkets, restaurants and pharmacies were fine, and the Agape was great. I guess I was also unlucky, for example with the Ruteng accommodation, which happened to be sold out when I was there, with vacancies both prior and after the visit. Self-drive, Mbeliling Homestay and an uninjured leg would really have made my week in Flores!

The available tourism transportation and accommodation services happened to be, however, as described. One can only hope that the scene will develop in the future, including the availability of standard car rental, the self drive, which is nowadays the norm even in New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, where other arrangements could still make sense, in terms of security. In Flores, no such excuses exist.

Personally, I am not planning to return to Flores but nevertheless hope that others are going to be able to enjoy the unique wildlife there. Good luck and lots of patience for your visit!



Fig. 24. Guidelines for toilet behavior at Denpasar airport, Bali. It would be interesting to try the ‘number two’, the ‘improper use’! It might, however, lead to another break of rules, the ‘washing of feet in the closet’!