

SHORT NOTE

Cattle egrets (*Bubulcus ibis*) and other vagrant birds in Fiji

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BirdLife International surveyed birds in Fiji from Oct 2002 to Aug 2005 to identify the country's Important Bird Areas (IBAs). Most surveys were undertaken in wet forest, focussing on threatened and endemic birds. A few small seabird-nesting islands were surveyed and other incidental birdwatching was concentrated around Suva. Although many new data were collected on the resident birds, only 2 new vagrant species were recorded. This suggests that the birds of Fiji have been relatively well-documented (excepting pelagic seabirds which were very poorly covered by the BirdLife surveys). These records update the review of Fiji's birds in Watling (2001)

On 25 Oct 2003, a flock of 8 cattle egrets (*Bubulcus ibis*) was found on the short grassland of Nausori airport at Suva. They were identified by their small size, stout build, stout bill with a small

jowl extending under the bill-base, and orange-buff head, neck, and mantle. All 8 were seen again on 26 Dec 2005 and on at least 6 other intermediate dates (by, variously, Guy Dutson, Dion Hobcroft/VENT, Digger Jackson, Richard Thomas/Birdquest, and Dick Watling). Many visits were made to the airport between these dates and the birds were clearly not present, probably in the extensive agricultural patchwork, including cattle-pastures, around Nausori. In Oct and Nov 2003, all were in breeding plumage, but none was seen with courtship-flushed bare-parts. This is the first record for Fiji. There are several records of small groups in New Caledonia, but not breeding (Barré & Dutson 2000; Barré & Bachy 2003). This species has become a regular non-breeding visitor from Australia to New Zealand, and to Norfolk and Lord Howe Is (Marchant & Higgins 1990; MacAllan *et al.* 2004).

The only species to naturally colonise Fiji in historical times is the white-faced heron (*Ardea novaehollandiae*). It colonised Fiji in 1997 (Watling

2001) and the first confirmed breeding was in Oct 2002 when young juveniles were seen at Natadola on Viti Levu by Dick Watling. It is now a widespread species in small numbers across the Viti Levu lowlands, for instance with up to seven along the Suva Point foreshore and 15 at the Nausori airport during these surveys. This species shares two features with the cattle egret and masked lapwing: recent colonisation of New Zealand and other islands, and primarily inhabiting pastoral and other short grasslands. It could be expected that these species will eventually colonise Fiji.

Two golden plovers seen at Suva Point from 22 Nov to at least 14 Dec 2002, and again on 30 Mar 2003, by Guy Dutton, Jörg Kretzschmar, and Dick Watling showed many characteristics of American golden plover (*Pluvialis dominica*) but other features were closer to those of the Pacific golden plover (*P. fulva*); they may have been hybrids but these species are often difficult to separate in the field (Marchant & Higgins 1993).

One masked lapwing (*Vanellus miles*) was seen by many observers at Nausori airport near Suva on several dates from Mar 2003 to Oct 2005 and another 2 observed at Vunisea Airport on Kadavu in Oct 2003 had apparently arrived about 10 months before. However, these were not seen on subsequent visits to the airport from Aug 2004. Although seen only on the grasslands beside the airports, the Nausori bird was commonly absent and is likely to have visited nearby agricultural land. Dick Watling observed 2 birds on Nasoso I at the Sabeto river mouth on 24 Jun 2004. Two masked lapwings were shot by Airports Fiji Ltd during birdstrike prevention culling at Nadi Airport in Jul 2006, and another was collected dead after striking an aircraft in the same month. All birds showed the dark sides to the breast that are characteristic of *V. m. novaehollandiae*. There are 2 previous records of the masked lapwing from Fiji, in 1997 and 1999 (Watling 2001). The 1st masked lapwings were noted on New Caledonia in 1994, and breeding was confirmed from 1998 (Barré 2002) and they colonised Lord Howe I from 1990 and New Zealand from 1932 (Marchant & Higgins 1993; McAllan *et al.* 2004).

A single grey-tailed tattler (*Heteroscelus [Tringa] brevipes*) was seen at Suva Point from 18 Oct to at least mid-Dec 2004. This individual was much paler than the many wandering tattlers (*H. incana*), especially its underparts (which were white except for a pale grey suffusion on the sides of the neck) and could be detected amongst them at a distance. At closer range, it showed distinctive long, clear supercilia from above the bill to the same distance behind the eye, and a contrasting, dark eye-stripe. Although it occasionally gave a fluid, up-slurred, call (e.g., "pee-o-whee" or "pooee"), the range of calls given by wandering tattlers at this site led us to

be very cautious about identifying these species on call alone. Indeed, the experience of the observers (Guy Dutton; Vilikesa Masibalavu; Dick Watling) calls into question previous records of this species in Fiji, as none has been supported by identification notes discussing plumage features.

On 18 Oct 2004, an adult laughing gull (*Larus atricilla*) in non-breeding plumage was seen on the mudflats at Suva Point. This bird was present at low tide on most days until Nov and then seen occasionally by Guy Dutton, Josh Engel, Vilikesa Masibalavu, and Dick Watling until at least Sep 2005. It was seen both perched and in flight with crested terns (*Sterna bergii*). It was identified by its dark, slightly drooping bill, white head with dark mottling behind the eye extending on to the hind-crown and neck, dark grey mantle and wing-coverts, and black wing-tips with a narrow white trailing edge and small white spots on the outer (c.3) primaries and tertials. A laughing gull was reported in Dec 1994 and Dec 1995 over sea-mounts off Kadavu (R. Stone, pers. comm. to D. Watling) and there are a handful of records from Polynesia and Australia (Higgins & Davies 1996; Vanderwerf *et al.* 2004).

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