

Philippines: Panay & Tablas



Independent Budget Birding May 27- June 7, 2017

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www.budgetbirders.com

Overview:

This short trip to the Philippines focused on visiting a few areas that we were unable to visit on our first trip to the Philippines last year (see [Philippines 2016 Trip Report](#)). The main areas visited were Panay, Tablas, and the immediate vicinity around Manila. Since this trip was very target focused, we only managed to find 134 species, but that included a number of difficult island endemics that are typically not seen on most trips to the Philippines. Most of the trip was done by public transportation, but we did rent a vehicle for 2 days around the Manila area. Overall cost for two people was \$1,163 including two internal flights, one ferry, and a rental car for 3 days. This report covers our trip to Panay and Tablas. I am not including any details on Luzon since there is ample information available on birding Luzon.

Itinerary:

Day 1: Arrive Caticlan 0700, travel Pandan, Hike to Sibaliw Station (0940-1400), birding around Sibaliw Station

Day 2: Morning below Sibaliw Station, afternoon hanging around the station

Day 3: Below Sibaliw Station (0600-0800), hike out (0800-1030), afternoon Pandan

Day 4: Depart Pandan (0500), Start hike from Alojipan up Mt Madja to campsite (0640-1100), afternoon above camp

Day 5: Above camp (0500-1000), hike down (1000-1330), Pandan for afternoon

Day 6: Depart Pandan (0500), start walk from Bacalan to Alegre Valley (0600), hike to hornbill spot and back (0700-1100), afternoon travel to Caticlan.

Day 7: Ferry from Caticlan to Odiongan (1000-1200), Jeepney to San Agustin (1315-1515), evening owling

Day 8: Dubduban watershed (0500-1100), ferry to Rhomblon (1315-1400)

Day 9: Rhomblon

Day 10: Travel Rhomblon to Tablas, flight to Manila, evening Angono Petroglyphs Museum (Philippine Eagle Owl)

Day 11: Manila Metro Park (0500-0800), Subic Bay afternoon

Day 12: Subic Bay, flight to Indonesia

Weather: We did not experience any major rain, but it was extremely hot and humid. Make sure to bring a lot of water on the hikes (especially the Striped Babbler hike as there's no water along it).

ATM: Make sure to get enough money out at the ATM in either Manila or Caticlan. There isn't an ATM in Pandan or in San Agustin on Tablas so plan accordingly

Acknowledgments: Thanks to Michael Kearns for sending me a lot of useful information when planning the itinerary. Also many thanks to Rhea on Panay who did an amazing job of helping coordinating logistics on arrival.

Resources:

GPS Tracks, Waypoints, & Maps.me

For those who don't own a GPS, buy one. The Garmin Etrex 30 is extremely easy to use and I feel is essential to any independently traveling birder. Using a GPS and a set of coordinates helps to eliminate the guess work in directions and really makes it easier for others to find the same location. In this report I try to use GPS coordinates as much as possible and once again, encourage others to do the same.

If you don't want to buy a GPS, a great alternative (and to be honest, a better alternative for general waypoint marking) is the app Maps.me. This app allows you to download offline maps for anywhere in the world. You can easily upload a kmz file that

will import all the waypoints and tracks from this trip into the map which is great for use in the field. You can also mark your own sightings in the app and then upload the kmz after your trip for others to use.

GPX file of all waypoints and tracks in this report are at the follow link:

<https://www.amazon.com/clouddrive/share/zskpr12Q6USdlt146X8NRF5mwhwuAsee6VRxHe73QUG>

If you do buy a Garmin GPS, you can download maps from the following site:

OSM Map: http://wiki.openstreetmap.org/wiki/OSM_Map_On_Garmin/Download: Download maps from around the world for Garmin

Google Translate

Another extremely helpful app is google translate. You can download Indonesian and then use it offline. This is extremely helpful when trying to communicate with porters, drivers, and other people that you meet.

Resources:

www.ebird.org: all checklists from the trip can be searched for on eBird

www.xeno-canto.org: Recordings for the trip were downloaded from here, my recordings will eventually be added

www.cloudbirders.com: Access to hundreds of trip reports

Reports:

Not many trip reports cover Panay and Tablas

[Panay, 2016](#): Charles Davies

Check out our blog for more information and blog posts about this trip

[Blog posts of Panay & Tablas](#)

Budget Breakdown:

The budget covers all travel from arrival in Manila on May 27th through departure on June 7th. Transport cost includes internal flights, car rental, and ferry costs. Total cost is for two people.

Category	Amount
Transport	\$ 543.76
Food	\$ 171.31
Lodging	\$ 157.10
Trek	\$ 138.97
Gasoline	\$ 50.35
Shopping	\$ 39.88
Guide	\$ 34.24
etc	\$ 28.20
Grand Total	\$ 1,163.81



Summary:

Although this island shares a lot of the same birdlife as neighboring Negros, Panay still boasts one endemic (Panay Striped-Babbler), two species essentially extirpated from Negros (Negros Bleeding-heart & Walden's Hornbill), and a number of other near endemics that are difficult to find on Negros (Yellow-faced Flameback, White-throated (Negros) Jungle-Flycatcher, Southern Indigo-banded Kingfisher, Visayan Rhabdornis). Although the island hosts an impressive list of "good" birds, getting to almost all of them is quite difficult. There's a reason tour groups don't visit this island and that is because all of the good birding locations involve long, often steep, hikes and usually require remote camping of at least one night. That being said, I still highly recommend visiting the island as long as you're capable of some long difficult hikes!

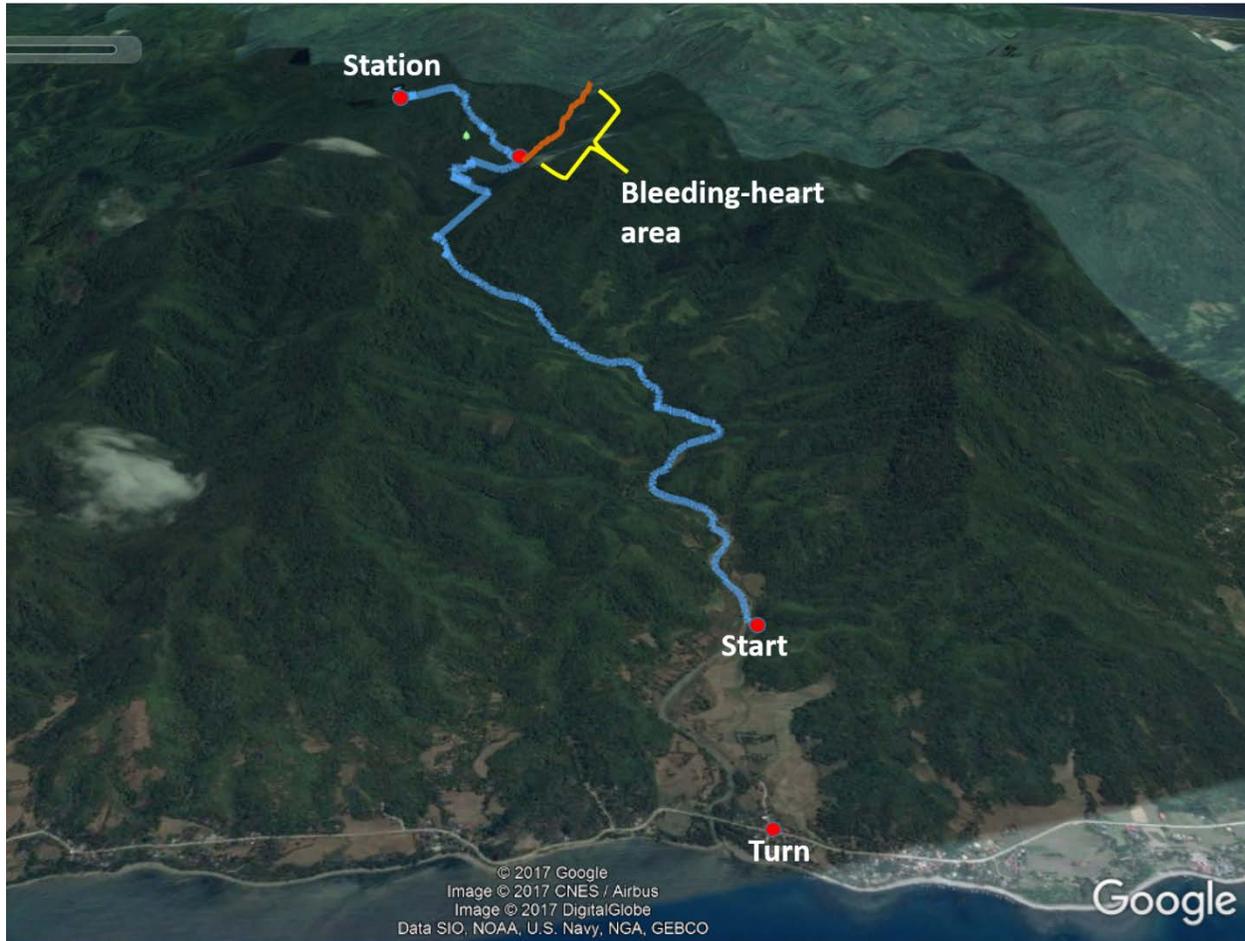
General Logistics:

Luckily coordinating logistics for Panay is rather easy thanks to Philicon employee, Rhea Santillan (fayerhean@yahoo.com.ph). Rhea has been a liaison for visiting birders for years and is able to coordinate all of the local guides and transportation necessary to visit the three main locations. Getting to the island is also quite easy with multiple flights and ferries arriving in Caticlan daily. We took an early morning flight from Manila to Caticlan (\$87 each, 0600-0700). From Caticlan you'll need to make your way to Pandan which is where Rhea lives and is also a perfect base location to visit the three birding sites. From the airport take a tuk-tuk to the ferry terminal (50 pesos) and take a bus or van to Pandan. We took a van (100 pesos per person) on the way there as well as on the way back (was only charged 50 pesos per person on the way back, maybe overcharged the first time?). Once in Pandan, the Philicon Office is located near the ocean at (11.718317, 122.09307). There are a few

accommodations in town. We stayed at the newly opened Rovel's By the Sea. It was 1,500 pesos per night for AC. I think fan only rooms were 600 pesos per person. We also coordinated to leave our extra gear at the hotel while we did overnight camping trips free of charge. The hotel owners can also arrange for you to have a massage at your room (500 pesos for 60 minutes, gotta keep the wife happy after long hikes!) There are multiple places to eat in town, but the restaurant "Boss Day" is by far the best. They actually serve filet mignon (250 pesos!) cooked appropriately! Highly recommended.



Sibaliw Station:



Target Birds: Negros Bleeding-heart, Yellow-faced Flameback, White-throated Jungle-Flycatcher, Visayan Rhabdornis, Negros Scops-Owl

Other good birds: Luzon Hawk-Owl, Philippine Frogmouth, Yellow-breasted Fruit-dove, Pink-bellied Imperial Pigeon, Maroon-naped Sunbird

Logistics: Sibaliw Station is located in the middle of the northwest peninsula. It is accessed from the town of Libertad, about a 40 minute drive from Pandan. From the main highway, you turn inland (11.755279, 121.96957) for another kilometer before reaching the start of the hike (11.763889, 121.97234). The hike is approximately 8.5 kilometers long and will take between 3.5-5.5 hours depending on your fitness level. We started the hike at 0940 after arriving on Panay at 0700. We had just finished traveling for 42 hours and had about 5 hours of sleep during that time period. Therefore going straight into this hike was very tough, but luckily we were still able to complete it in 4 hours. The first portion of the hike involves numerous (9-12ish) river crossings on very slippery limestone rock. From there you climb up hill to a dry river bed and walk along the dry river bed for a while. This river bed is the main location for the bleeding-heart. At 11.809338, 121.97275, you leave the river bed and start the steepest portion of the hike where you climb up to 570m before descending for about 20 minutes to the station located at 475m.

Accommodation: The station itself is a large single building with a few rooms sectioned off with wooden bed platforms. I'd recommend that you bring some type of sleeping pad or even a tent to set up because they do not have any mosquito nets. There's also a shower, but during our visit a pit viper had taken up residence in it. We probably could have moved him, but it was more enjoyable to just watch him on occasion.

Costs: We were charged 1,000 pesos per day per person for full room and board. This also includes Jun as a guide. The minimum rate for porters and guides during the hike is 225 pesos. During both our walk up and down we had one porter and one guide. Having two people is completely unnecessary, but I'm not sure if it's avoidable. We paid the porter and guide 300 pesos each way. It is also recommended to tip Jun (or in our case, his son). Transport to the start of the hike was arranged through Rhea. She organized a tuk-tuk which cost 500 pesos each way. Although this was convenient, there are plenty of buses passing by Libertad and going via public transport would be an easy way to save on costs.

Birding: Although the Negros Bleeding-heart can be seen throughout the area, the best area is the dry river bed located about 1 hours walk before the station. It's a bit frustrating knowing that you have to back-track to get to the birding site, but once you arrive back in the dry river bed, the walking is a lot easier than the hills closer to the station. The first afternoon we arrived, Jun and I took a walk along the trails around the station, but didn't see much. He showed me a few old bleeding-heart nests and showed me a few areas where others had seen the bird in the past. He also showed me a nesting Philippine Frogmouth just outside of the station. This bird has nested around the station for the past few years. The next morning we departed at 0430 in order to make it to the dry river bed just after first light. Jun had to leave for a funeral so his son, Benjamin, came along as our guide. Almost immediately upon entering the river bed, we had a bleeding heart respond to the tape. There were two birds singing and after about one hour, we finally got our first look at a bird perched about 20 meters up in a tree at around 0700. For the next two hours we attempted to see it again and managed to see the first bird twice more and the other one once. I believe the two birds we had were a pair. Once I recorded the second bird, the first one, responded very aggressively to the tape and ran up and down the river bed in the open as we hid along the edge (11.81037, 121.9736)! Also near this area we had White-throated Jungle-Flycatcher (11.809818, 121.97372). We then walked up the river bed for a few kilometers looking for flamebacks, but couldn't find any. Upon returning to the beginning, I heard a Yellow-faced Flameback, and a pair quickly responded to playback in the same area we had the bleeding-hearts! We took the afternoon off to catch up on sleep and that night I found a pair of Negros Scops-Owls near the station at (11.819175, 121.96853), heard a few Luzon Boobooks, and saw an Elegant Tit roosting on the windowsill of the station. The next morning we planned to hike out after spending the morning again with the bleeding-hearts. Unfortunately I dropped my rather expensive tactical flashlight during the pre-dawn hike and we ended up searching for over an hour before finding it. Therefore I didn't get to the bleeding-heart spot until after 0700. A single bird was calling in the same section as the day prior, but it was far up a rocky hillside. I climbed up the rocks for a while and although I got close to it, I was never able to see it. We left by 0800 to hike out. It took 2 ½ hours to hike out from the dry river bed.



Mount Madja:



It is best to hike up and down via the red route, as the blue route is much longer and involves wet river crossings

Target Birds: Panay Striped-Babbler, Visayan Rhabdornis

Other good birds: Visayan Tailorbird, Mountain Warbler, Mountain White-eye, Island Flycatcher, Maroon-naped Sunbird

Logistics: Access to this trail is from the village of Alojipan about one hour motorcycle drive south of Pandan. From Pandan head south and in the town of Culasi, head inland (11.425671, 122.055839) until the road ends at Alojipan. From here we were met by two locals that Rhea had arranged for us; a 69 year old man who would be our guide and a 17 year old kid to be our porter. Neither spoke English. We also bought food the day prior in Pandan to bring with us for both ourselves and our two locals. Make sure you bring a lighter as well to make a fire! We had a tent and sleeping bags with us, but if you don't have them, Rhea should be able to arrange for those as well. We left Pandan at 0500 and finally started the hike at 0640 (11.415878, 122.10684). It took us 4 hours to complete the very steep 6.7 km hike to the camp site at 1160m (11.403565, 122.14937). The first portion of the hike goes through high razor grass so make sure you wear long pants and a long sleeve shirt (we didn't and our arms got cut up badly). Also, there's no access to water until almost the end of the hike, so make sure you bring A LOT of water (this area of the Philippines is extremely hot and humid) and make sure your porter/guides bring water for themselves as well. From the camp site, the trail continued uphill eventually reaching the top of the ridge. From here you have to cross a knife-edged section of trail (with steep banks on both sides) and then you follow the trail along the top of the ridge as it continues to get higher. The highest point we made it to was 1450m which is about where the good habitat ends. On the way down we took a different route that was supposed to avoid the long grass, but it was way longer in length and involved two wet river crossings. Don't go that way. Just take the normal trail. It took us 3 ½ hours to descend, but had we done it the same way, it probably would have only taken 2 ½-3. Rhea had arranged for the motorbikes to be waiting when we returned to Alojipan,

but to be honest, it'd be way cheaper (and just as quick) to just take a motorbike out to the highway and get on one of the many buses heading towards Pandan.

Costs: We paid both the guide and the porter 500 pesos per day. (1,000 each in total). Transport was arranged through Rhea as two motorbikes. Each motorbike was 400 pesos per person round trip.

Birding: We arrived at the campsite midday and after setting up camp and eating lunch, we continued up the trail until the ridge. We made it to around 1350m, but soon had to turn around as a thunderstorm rolled through. After the thunderstorm ended, I once again ascended to the ridge and made it to about 1350m for the last part of the evening. I saw Mountain White-eyes, Mountain Warbler, Visayan Tailorbird, Island Flycatcher, and Elegant Tit, but the babblers were nowhere to be found. The next morning we left camp at 0500 to start the hike back up to the ridge. We quickly made our way along the ridge to 1450m and then started birding our way back along it. We spent the entire morning from around 1400m-1300m finding numerous flocks, but I only had the Panay Striped-babbler once at around 0730 at 11.406337, 122.1525. I only saw the bird for about 30 seconds and it never made a sound. Unfortunately Melissa was further up the ridge and never got to see the bird. No clue as to why this species was so difficult, but they just weren't around! Around 1000 we descended to the campsite where there was a large flock that included Visayan Rhabdornis and Yellow-headed Canary-Flycatcher, but still no more babblers. We left camp around 1100 and started the walk back to the village. Also of note, we flushed a single buttonquail on the walk in.



Alegre Valley:



Target Birds: Walden's Hornbill, Southern Indigo-banded Kingfisher, White-throated Jungle-flycatcher

Logistics: The Alegre valley is located about 40 minutes south of Pandan. Head south from Pandan and in the town of Bacalan turn inland (11.546582, 122.08421) and follow the road until it ends in the village of Alegre. From Alegre you need to cross the river at 11.538774, 122.11338 (wet crossing, we took off our boots) and follow a trail for 1-2 hours until reaching the hornbill site. Rhea had arranged for a local guide, but for some reason two guys decided to take us (neither spoke English). The trail crosses the river a few times and then follows alongside it until (11.536051, 122.12792), at which point you climb steeply out of the bottom of the valley. You'll continue along the side of the valley until reaching a large open area with a few coconut plantations. It took us 1 hour 15 minutes to reach the hornbill spot. Total distance to the hornbill spot is just under 3km. If for some reason your motorbike only takes you to Bacalan, make sure you take another the full way to Alegre. This should only cost 20 pesos per person and saves a lot of walking. We didn't know and ended up walking from Bacalan to Alegre in the morning which wasn't too bad, but on the way back in the sun it would have been brutal had we not found someone to ride us.

Costs: Rhea told us the cost for the guide would be 400 pesos, but for some reason we had two guides even though we tried to explain once we arrived we only needed one. In the end we gave them 600 pesos in total to split however they felt necessary. Rhea arranged motorbikes for us, but we only used them in the morning and they only dropped us off at Bacalan. We still ended up paying 200 pesos per person which was way overpriced, but I didn't feel like arguing with Rhea as she's very helpful. We easily took a bus back for 20 pesos each.

Birding: We arrived in Bacalan around 0600, but due to some type of miscommunication, ended up walking from Bacalan to Alegre which took about 35 minutes. After reaching Alegre we finally crossed the river and started along the trail up the valley. The Southern Indigo-banded Kingfisher is reliably seen at the last river crossing at 11.536051, 122.12792. We ended up finding their nest which was underneath the rock overhang near the bamboo bridge. For the hornbills, we originally spent 45 minutes scanning from the large open area at 11.54258, 122.13372, but then our guides decided we should hike in a bit further. We walked for about 15 more minutes and climbed a steep grassy hillside at 11.551927, 122.13856 which was a great location to scan a much better patch of forest. From here it only took 5 minutes before I spotted a male Walden's Hornbill in flight. We were able to watch it land on a snag and perch in the open for a few minutes. We stayed another 30 minutes, but didn't see any more. At this time of year females are inside the nest cavities so only males are expected to be seen. On the walk out I had a singing White-throated Jungle-flycatcher at 11.546129, 122.1357.



Tablas

Logistics: We arrived on Tablas via ferry from Caticlan to Odiongan. The ferry (2Go) was scheduled to depart Caticlan at 0900, but didn't leave until around 1000. It took just over two hours to reach Odiongan. From the ferry terminal, we took a tricycle to the bus (jeepney) terminal for 30 pesos per person. The next jeepney to San Agustin wasn't leaving until 1400, so we had a bit of a wait. Luckily the jeepney was full by 1315 so it left a bit early. The ride to San Agustin took a little over 2 hours. When leaving we took a jeepney from San Agustin south to the airport. This took about 2 hours. We flew out at 1300 to Manila.

San Agustin:



Target Birds: Tablas Drongo, Tablas Faintial, Tablas Bulbul, Romblon Boobook, Dimorphic Dwarf-Kingfisher, Mantanani Scops-Owl

Other good birds: endemic subspecies of Orange-bellied Flowerpecker, Rufous-lored Kingfisher, and Coppersmith Barbet (didn't see)

Accommodations: There are a few hotels in town, all located next to each other. We stay at the August Inn (12.567037, 122.134119) which was clean, but very basic. 800 pesos for a room with AC. It was 200 pesos per person for a room with just a fan. The hotel next to this one also looked decent, but was fully booked. The Felnor Lodge and Meran Bayview Hotel charged the same prices, but were complete dumps and should be avoided.

Logistics: Access to the forest is in the Dubduban watershed, just outside of town. Although this area can be visited by yourself, it's recommend to get in touch with local bird guide Rodell (09498944507). Rodell knows the area very well and is excellent at spotting birds. We didn't have Rodell's number, but were able to track him down by visiting the Public Water Works which is located near the plaza at 12.567699, 122.133536. We spent an hour in the evening with Rodell looking for owls and then the next morning as well. To get to the birding area, turn left at 12.568354, 122.12835 and keep right at 12.570175, 122.11952. Rodell's house is at 12.572665, 122.11706 (not the house you see, you need to take the path that goes up hill, in case you are still looking for him). We continued along the road and parked at 12.575873, 122.11162. We then took a trail to

the right which crossed two small dry riverbeds and entered the woods at 12.578398, 122.11134. From here the trail goes up through coconut plantations before dropping down into a good forested ravine. From here we went upstream until 12.582419, 122.10925. Although it'd be possible to do this on your own, I still recommend going with Rodell as it's good to keep the locals involved and shows that conservation matters.

Costs: Rodell didn't ask for a specific fee so we gave him 600 pesos for the evening of owling and birding the next morning until 1000. We also paid 100 pesos for the extra motorbike that picked us up at the hotel and took us back.

Birding: For owling we parked at Rodell's house and walked another 75 meters up the road to a large tree in the coconut plantation. As dusk fell both Mantanani Scops-Owl and Romblon Boobook could be seen without even playing tape! There were many scops-owls in the area and a pair of boobooks hung out in the large tree. The next morning we hiked in to a well forested ravine. Since the target birds here are pretty easy, we dedicated our time to looking for Dimorphic Dwarf-Kingfisher and figured the others would simply be seen along the way. We heard a few kingfishers on our walk in and then Rodell flushed one off of a perch over the water at 12.581809, 122.10923. We decided to stake out this spot and over the next 2 ½ hours the kingfisher returned to the branch twice offering great views. As predicted, while waiting we saw Tablas Bulbul, Drongo, and Fantail. There was also a Rufous-lored Kingfisher nesting in a termite mound nearby and numerous Orange-bellied Flowerpeckers singing overhead. A great little spot! Since we saw all of our targets that morning and were already a day ahead of schedule, we decided to leave San Agustin and take the ferry to Romblon and spend two days on the beach before departing for Manila.



Romblon Boobook

Romblon

This wasn't a birding trip, but for those interested, ferries leave San Agustin at 0630 and 1300 for Romblon, but may leave early if full (ours left at 1200). Once in Romblon we took a tricycle south to the small San Pedro Resort. A very nice secluded place to stay for only 800 pesos a night. The access road at night had tons of Mantanani Scops-Owls (but sadly no boobooks). We easily saw 5 and heard at least 5 more in just an hour of looking. We also walked south along the main road for another kilometer to a small bird sanctuary which was just a small concrete boardwalk through some mangroves. There were 62 Philippine Ducks on the water and a few Lowland White-eyes and Mangrove Blue Flycatchers in the mangroves.



Tablas Fantail



Mantanani Scops-Owl



Philippine Eagle Owl



Ashy Thrush